

A photograph of a roadkill bird on asphalt with a person's brown boots in the background. The bird is in the foreground, lying on its back with its wings spread. The boots are in the background, slightly out of focus. The text 'Half Dead' is in red at the top, and 'Roadkill' is in white, partially overlapping the boots.

Half Dead

Roadkill

short stories by **PAUL DONOHUE**

HALF DEAD ROAD KILL.

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100 First Avenue, Suite 1100, Pittsburgh, PA 15222

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412-566-5656

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Book Design by Vanessa Jeschke

Printed in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION MAY 2014

ISBN 978-0-9912550-3-0

e-book: ISBN 978-0-9912550-4-7

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Koala Bear



So I'm jogging in the Marina and I stop at the light at the intersection of Bay and Laguna and I'm doing that running-in-place thing I've seen other joggers do (I'm still not sure what it means) when I look to my left and accidentally catch the eyes of another jogger who's appeared right there next to me, bobbing up and down just like me, she's really short, about my size and this surprises me so much I don't notice the light change, but she does, and she's across and onto the track at Crissy Field before I can do anything—not that I would've done anything anyway but I like to think I might've because she's cute (at least I think she's cute but I really only caught a glimpse of her in that fleeting moment between red and green).

So I follow after her—there's really nowhere else to go—but I go slower because I'm afraid of catching up with her—she might think I'm hitting on her, but that's when I notice she's wearing some of those fly-away jogging shorts they wear these days, real thin nylon but on hers one flap has flipped itself under, exposing most of her left buttock and I gasp so loud some people sitting on a blanket in the grass look up at me accusingly so I pick up the pace but that only puts me closer to her and I'm beginning to think she'll think I'm a leech and other people will see me running after this short girl with her butt hanging out and think I'm a leech, because, although I'm jogging I'm not really wearing your typical jogging clothes, in fact, I'm just wearing my usual jeans and button-down shirt and cowboy boots. So I decide it would be best to get ahead of her so no one could accuse me of any stalker-like activity and I pick up the pace even more but it's slow going because she's really good, she must jog a lot (unlike me) and I can't help but notice her buttock is really muscular and tan and... I can't think those thoughts, so I really let loose and I'm nearly sprinting, I'm finally getting closer and she can hear my cowboy boots now because she starts looking back over her shoulder and I can't wait until I'm in front of her just to prove I'm really just a normal guy and not some weirdo and that's about when she takes the turn on the trail where it hooks back toward the road and I can't see for a moment as she circles the juniper bush on that part of the path (and I have to admit I was looking for her reappearance on the other side so as to get a better look at her) so I didn't see she'd fallen down, probably while she was looking over her shoulder in fear of me, but I did see her in time to be able to leap full over her crumpled body, missing her entirely except for the very tip of my left boot, which clipped her cleanly right on the tip of her nose, and I landed beyond the path, breaking through a twine divider set up to preserve the surrounding marsh, probably killing a half dozen or so endangered plants in the process.

So I'm up in a flash, horrified by what I'd done, ready to apologize my little ass off and she's sitting there quietly with one leg under her hanging-out butt and the other stuck out straight while she's holding her nose with one hand and I'm surprised to see a golf ball in her other hand and I think she's going to fling it at my head which would be okay with me because I deserve it, I'm about to smother her with sorries when she shocks me—she says she's sorry, she's soooo sorry, and she's suddenly apologizing and apologizing and I realize she hadn't known I was there at all, and she's showing me this golf ball she'd

slipped on and how it was all her fault and am I alright? I'm speechless—she really is cute and I can't speak... and she looks at me because I'm not speaking so finally I ask her if she's okay and she smiles and says she may have a sprained ankle and could I help her up and next thing you know I'm touching, actually touching her, with permission and everything.

So to help get me through the next few high-adrenaline minutes while I helped her limp from the track to the street, me touching beautiful girl, I try to distract myself from her lithe little form by improvising a series of diversionary tactics on the spot, focusing immediately on a surprisingly ugly mole on the back of her neck, the kind old people get, thin and long, with like a square top, so thin and long you could probably get a good grip on it and rip it right off and say, See? See how easy that was? And then to divert myself from this diversionary tactic (it is making me queasy) I concentrate instead upon her reddening nose, the faintest impression of an X now marring its perfect surface, compliments of the stainless steel tip of my cowboy boot, which reminds me of my own X-affliction, the two X-shaped scars on my eyelids which no one can ever really see, they say, they're so faint, but which I've been told become subliminally disturbing if I blink a lot—so I've since conditioned myself to blink only when absolutely necessary, this conditioning coming not long after the event happened in sixth-grade metal shop when little Jimmy Mercadoo and his little henchmen branded both my eyelids with strips of crossed soldering wire in an attempt to create a real-life version of the dead cartoon character with the X-es in his eyes, and then I try to avoid where this “X” coincidence might take me in relation to her, you know, Fate, twisting Fate, Oh, we're so alike and all (not to mention our similar smallness) by considering the more obvious, real-life reasons I was touching this beautiful woman, namely: She'd asked me, she needed help, she was injured, and I was just the first available human, and, even though I was more than relieved her shorts had fallen back down into their proper place when I'd helped her up, and in spite of my attempted distractions as we walked, I still held her out at arm's-length, trying hard not to touch her while I was touching her, like I was just showing off a new shirt.

So we get to the street and we're waiting for a cab to drive by because she'd jogged down from Pacific Heights and could never make it back up the hill, so we stand there for a while and wait... and wait some more... and I'm really uncomfortable and can't think of anything to say but she doesn't seem to notice, she's talking and talking, but in a really nice way, she's really sweet and sunny (now I know what people mean when they say someone is “sunny”) but I can barely listen I'm so distracted by her prettiness and her shortness, I don't meet many people my size, especially cute little short girls who jog, I try to listen, I hear something about her health insurance and her dad and her name is Ramona and I'm soooo nice and she's soooo sorry and so it goes and we're still waiting and no cabs come by and finally she asks me about payphones, she left her cell at home (I don't even own a cell) and I don't know if there are any payphones (I don't even know if they make payphones anymore) so I tell her I suppose there might be one up at the Safeway, about seven blocks away, and then I make the mistake of telling her my house is right across the street and down the alley, and she loves this and she's asking really nice if she could use my phone and I have to say yes because that's the polite thing to do, so the next thing you know we're stumbling across the street—again, with touching and permission—

and I'm trying to remember if I made my bed that day—mind you not because I had any thoughts about using it with her, I'm no Donnie Juan, but because I live in just one room and the bed's like right there when you open the door, I live in the converted garage of what was once my family home, the main house of which my mother sold off to Clancy's family in the late seventies (Clancy, that's my arch-enemy) she sold it right before she died with the provision that I could keep the garage to live in (which is where I was living at the time anyway) but I still don't know why she sold it, it wasn't like we needed the money, but she did, and it just left me with more money that I don't know what to do with, except now I'm thinking how I'd love to spend some of it on this Ramona but I can't let myself think about things that'll never happen so I pick up the pace just to get it all over with and I'm practically dragging her up the alley, she's so weightless even I don't have a problem, and we finally get to my place.

So I open the garage door—I've never gotten around to putting a regular door in—it's one of those old garage doors that swing out and up on these wobbly rusted girders and I can see right away that I didn't make my bed and there's my half-eaten breakfast getting old on the kitchen table and the TV is still on but what distresses me most is I forgot about my animals—I have this taxidermy collection that was my dad's (my mom made him move it out of the big house years ago, said it made her sneeze [she really just hated it]) with like Gila monsters and bald eagles and stuff it usually freaks people out—Clancy calls it my “Creepatorium”—so I usually open the door just enough so I can scooch under so no one can see, but of course with Ramona I have to open it all the way (even though she's small enough to scooch, I could never ask her to scooch, she'd think I was crazy) so I open the door all the way, ready for a creepout scene, but instead she shocks me—again—she loves my collection as soon as she sees it, she says her dad is a big hunter, she's gone hunting before, she even goes so far as to stroke my bobcat on the head in appreciation.

She coos and coos, pointing here and there (Koala bears, she says, They're soooo cute. I agree wholeheartedly but mumble how they can be pretty vicious sometimes...) yet I'm only trying to distract her with trivia because I suddenly remember they turned off my phone again (that odd bastard at the phone company) but I can't tell her this because she might think I'm acting strangely, brought her back on pretenses, so I pick up the phone and pretend to dial a cab company, and then I pretend to listen, and then I shake the phone a little, Hmm, I say, shaking my head, Hmm, It's not working for some reason... and I shake it some more and hit the clicker and then I swear at the phone company, and I'm trying to figure out what to do now—the closest phone would be Clancy's but I'd rather die than go to Clancy for help but then I look at Ramona and she's caressing her ankle and I can see it's swelling, and a little blue (but still really cute)—I have to get her help and I don't know any of the other neighbors, they give me dirty looks all the time, probably because I live in a garage (they don't know I could buy them twenty times over) and then it occurs to me: I almost whoop with happiness when I realize what it might look like were I to show up at Clancy's with her, I'd show him, with his soiree parties and his society-page friends, his creepy buddies: Getty and Gatti and Shultzie and Swiggee and all their friends with their cutesy first names like Pinkie and Garvin and Clancy—that's his first name, by the way, Clancy (and his last name, the bastard) and, ooh, there's that Victoria's Secret model friend of his who's really pretty with the big pretty mouth who's like a lawyer now, and a celebrity, she was married to the mayor, I saw her once on the front

balcony and I was so amazed I couldn't stop staring—although I did cross the street so she wouldn't think I was looking up her skirt—and since then I'm always looking at the balconies of Clancy's house (my house, as I still consider it) with its tinted plate glass, mullioned windows, blond woods—a nest of debauchery and lewdness I've been forced to witness many times now, his thousand bastard friends with their clink-clink wineglasses and late-night roaring and cute-girl laughing and sometimes I even hear Clancy yelling out to me, to me, Hey, freak, hey FREAK! Which of course I ignore; but the worst is his seduction-routine, always the same, with the same cheesy make-out music and remote-control light dimmers and he always has champagne, yet it always works, a different girl every time, and sometimes I just want to stand up and yell at the night what a fool she is, Can't you see he's full of smarmy shit and just wants your pants on his mantle? But I haven't yet because at least she hasn't been one of them—I know she's not that kind of girl (even if she was a Victoria's Secret model).

I don't see Clancy in the back so we go around to the front and there he is, sitting on the balcony facing the bay, barefoot with his feet up on the railing, yakking on his cell in his oh-so-casual cargo pants and his cut-off shirt showing off his supertan and his 24-Hour-Fitness muscles, he sees me first and scowls but as soon as he sees Ramona he's down the steps in a glide, still talking on his cell, and he walks right up to us, to her, smiling down—he's pretty tall—and he actually says—get this—he says to the phone, Mister Mayor? Mister mayor, lemme call you back, as he's looking Ramona right in the eye, Something's come up. I swear his eyes are actually twinkling and I realize he's going to hit on her: I was so sure she wasn't his type—too tiny and sweaty and limping, with an X on her nose and a creepy mole and she hunts for chrissakes but I should've known, this doesn't stop Clancy as he hangs up, on the mayor, and, sounding very concerned, he touches her arm and actually says, the jackass, Miss, has this man been bothering you?

So, there I am, frozen in fucking time, I can't say anything and my pulse is failing and I'm so furious I think I'm going to faint, it's over, it's all over... but that's when Ramona shocks me yet again, first she says, No, not at all, and then she explains the situation very nicely and could he call a cab, which isn't very shocking at all, but all the while she's watching Clancy's roving eyes and his hand on her arm when she drops the bomb, she says to Clancy as calm as can be: Could you please take your hand off? And it's so off-hand like it wasn't anything, she's not going to make a big deal out of it—but I can see he's shocked, I watch him look at me, with my arm around her, and I can see he doesn't understand, this is new to him, No permission I nearly yell, yet to his credit he recovers nicely, looking down at his lecherous hand as if he'd just forgotten about it, just resting, and he pulls away, Of course, he says, supercalm, just like her...

But I'm like...WOW...I'm suddenly soaring, I'm walking on air, this is it, this is the girl, the moment, he's down, he's done, I've kicked his ass, and it's immediately verified as he meekly calls for the cab, so much so that as he says to the dispatcher Can I get a cab? I lean up into his face and hiss One Sneath Alley—that's my address, not his—and he looks to Ramona who, to my everlasting joy, nods her head in agreement, smiling at me. Clancy hesitates, brain clacking futilely in defeat, and finally says into the phone, One Sneath Alley. One Sneath Alley.

Victory.

We limp back to my place in name only because we're really flying, I can feel it and I think she feels it too, I can't believe it: When I woke up this afternoon I never imagined such a beautiful thing could happen, this must all be meant to be, but as I carry her over the threshold of my room like the conquering king that I am, I try and check myself: I'm a realist, after all, I try not to get too far ahead—there's still the question of logistics here, of times and dates...of dates! And although I'm more calm and collected than I have ever been in my life, with the surety of it all, like I'm being pushed along by the Hands Of Fate towards my greatest desire (she even looks a little like my Victoria's Secret model, albeit a baby version) I'm still so nervous that when I finally do muster the courage to speak my voice is quavering and I'm sweating ridiculously and I have to clear my throat several times, trying to come up with some way to suavely ask her out—I can only hear Clancy's slick voice and cheesy crap lines here—yet I know I have to say something so I say, cool as can be (I think), I say, Hey, Ramona, I had a really good time with you today... and in the instant between that line and the next she nearly laughed—she didn't laugh, of course, she restrained herself admirably—but I've seen that look before, admittedly not for many years (I avoid such situations) as familiar as a Clancy smirk, and my second line, the trailing ...We should get together sometime... died a quick death, disintegrating into a series of pathetic mumbles, really just the result of forward volition than anything else, after I saw how things really were, so much so I didn't even listen to her goddamn blow-off lines, I'd heard it all before, I barely heard anything, something about her new boyfriend and Oh, how nice I was, so sweet, and she was so sweet about it, so damn sunny as she blew me off I wanted to shake her out of it, wake her up, explain to her about the Hands Of Fate, tell her what I knew—knowing simultaneously she would never understand... which resulted simultaneously in my sudden urge to grab her, smash her, stuff her, kill her, right there—but that's when the yellow whale of a taxi slid into view in front of my garage with a soft little honk and she was thanking me again and again, moving toward the cab—without my help—and quickly swallowed up into the cool depths of the backseat where I could see nothing except her tiny, little hand waving goodbye. Goodbye.

And then she was gone.

The William Tell Incident



We were sighting guns one Saturday in October, in the early seventies. Me, my dad, my Uncle Rupert, my Uncle Jim, and my two older brothers, Mike and Scott. You sight your guns right before deer season, aim at targets and try and figure if they're shooting too much to the right or left or up or down, then you "true" them. We usually made a day of it. We'd driven up to Clarion County around noon, stopping at a bar on Route 22 for lunch, place called the Pit-Stop. I remember deep-fried mushrooms and all the Pepsi we could drink. My dad and uncles drank Straubs and ate Italian hoagies. Then we drove along the Clarion River for a while before turning down an old logging road. It dead-ended at an old dump. I was eight or nine.

A really hot day, me and my brothers kept yelling about Indians and Indian summer, running around the trash pile, picking at things; we found a crab-apple tree and threw rotten apples at each other. My dad and Uncle Jim sat on the hood, Uncle Rupert facing them, all smoking and drinking beer, listening to the Pitt-Penn State game on the radio.

It was a really old dump, you could tell. There was an old-style stove upside down in the weeds, an old couch, lots of bottles and rusted cans—some so rusted they'd crumple to powder when stepped on.

I held one up. "Dad, what's a 'Clabber Girl'?"

He looked at me and squinted. "Baking powder, believe it or not." He turned. "Remember when Jimmy Dolan thought a 'Clabber Girl' was a diseased whore?"

Uncle Jim laughed loudly, Uncle Rupert smirked.

Scott and Mike were already setting up targets. That was our job. Metal was good, made good sound, but glass was better: a bullet hitting glass left no doubt and was definitely more fun. When I found a shiny old medicine bottle of blue glass, I knew we'd save it for last. I set it on a tree stump about thirty yards away.

At halftime of the game, Dad opened the trunk and started pulling rifles out of their plastic-leather cases. Uncle Rupert wandered off towards the crab-apple tree, lighting another cigarette. He wasn't much of a hunter. After the Viet Nam War, he said, he'd lost all interest.

"No challenge," I heard him say more than once. I agreed: a deer is the most helpless thing you're ever going to see.

Rupert was youngest. Seven years younger than Uncle Jim, nine years younger than my dad. I guess he was around twenty-nine or thirty at the time. A big gap in age, which is maybe why I always got along with him—I was six years younger than Scott, seven years younger than Mike.

Rupert was cool, a "ladies man," he talked more like us than the adults, grew his dark hair long; "hippie hair" my mom called it. She didn't like Uncle Rupert.

My dad and Uncle Jim began loading long golden bullets into their thirty-ought-sixes. They preferred the Springfields, but we also had an old Winchester, which today was for my brother Mike: he was fifteen, had his learners permit, and would hunt in November on Opening Day.

My father shot first, his target an old street sign, using the “r” in MERGE as his bull’s eye. Uncle Jim tracked his progression with a pair of binoculars. Mike and Scott stood behind, reverently watching every move.

Jim crooned, like a baseball announcer. “Little high and outside!”

My dad slowly adjusted the sights, minute turns on serrated wheels, one horizontal, one vertical. “This one always leans left,” he grunted, then shot again. The dull plink of the dented sign was clearly audible.

After a while my dad swung the rifle to the right, aimed, and blew an old milk bottle to smithereens. “That oughta do it,” he said.

Uncle Jim went next, firing, cursing repeatedly at an old frying pan, not even hitting it for the first six or seven shots. My ears were ringing so I walked back toward the apple tree. Uncle Rupert was leaning against the trunk smoking a joint. I knew it was a joint right away, although I’d never seen one in person, only on tv. This scared the shit out of me, but he just laughed. “Here you go, kid.” He held his hand. “Just kidding. Your dad would shoot me.”

I walked back toward the shooters.

Suddenly booming sounds from the west echoed off the hills to our right. Uncle Jim looked at my dad. “Shotgun,” Dad said. “Small game.” He looked over at me and Rupert. “Rabbits, maybe.”

We heard the distant baying of hounds.

“Maybe fox.”

My brother Mike went next, with the Winchester. Unlike the thirty-ought-sixes this one had a scope. My dad and Uncle Jim never used scopes. “Training wheels,” they called them. But for Mike, a novice, it was acceptable. He began to shoot.

“Apple on a fence, boy,” Uncle Jim said, “Apple on a fence.” He meant the scope—you line up the target to “sit” on the horizontal crosshairs before shooting. On the third shot I heard a dull thud—he’d hit a wooden sign we’d set up, an old Pampers ad. “There you go, son,” Dad said calmly from behind the binoculars. “Keep it there, aim for the baby’s face.”

Uncle Rupert had come up beside me. “Check this out,” he said quietly. He pulled up his Santana shirt, revealing a small leather holster from which he plucked a bright silver gun.

“What is that? Cap gun?” It looked exactly like a cap gun I had once.

“Cap gun? Hell no. It’s a .22 pistol. Got it in Tokyo.” He pointed at the crab-apple tree. “Go set up a target. I’ll show ya.”

I walked toward the tree, the echo of rifle shots in my ears. My brothers and Uncle Jim and my dad were paying no attention to us.

“Don’t pull the trigger,” I heard them saying, “Squeeze the trigger.”

“Slow your breath, shoot on the exhale.”

“Apple on the fence, boy.”

“Safety. Safety...”

I couldn’t find any targets over by the tree and I nearly wiped out, at one point, on sliding rotten apples. This made Uncle Rupert laugh. He was loading his pistol, spinning the chambers like an Old West man. I was laughing too. I picked up a not-too-rotten apple and put it on my head, William Tell-style. He nearly doubled over.

Three things happened next, at exactly the same time: Uncle Rupert, still laughing, aimed the loaded gun straight at my head, my dad looked up from his binoculars, and Mike nailed the blue medicine bottle.

Good for Mike, I thought.

It doesn’t matter, it will never matter, what happened next.

That Rupert raised his arm and shot the bullet safely into the highest branches of the tree: It was only us who laughed.

That my father crossed the clearing with deceptive speed to slap Uncle Rupert in the face, open-handed: It was only me who was surprised.

That Rupert appeared less and less in our lives, until he moved on to Florida, and then jail: It was only me who didn’t see it coming.

That I’m banging on my estranged brother’s door at four in the morning thirty years later, drunk and coked-out, yelling something about blue glass: It’s only me who remembers what that means.

Awe



They met at a boxing match. When, after something flew out into the audience, my father—believing it was part of a mouth (some bridge-work perhaps, or a plate) reached out instinctively—his first thought “reward,” knowing the money these boxers made (or, at the very worst, as his semi-quick mind mangled it: “ransom”) the hurtling object materialized into a mere mouthpiece, black in color and shiny with spit, but it was already too late, his right arm had already shot across the empty seat beside him to the next, snagging it out of the air just inches from my mother’s face.

The smatter of cheers that bubbled up from the crowd, and an anonymous, congratulatory handclap on his shoulder drew no response from my father. He calmly handed the piece back to one of the ring boys while wiping his hands off with a crisp, white handkerchief. Many were impressed. My mother was in awe.

When she finally built up enough courage to buy him a drink, as reward for his heroic act, he stared at her for a long time before assenting.

Budweiser was the first thing he ever said to her.

Maybe it was his narrow eyes, which to a pretty young girl in the late fifties could have been construed as mysterious, or worldly. (These same eyes proved later, to a young boy, to be merely frightening.) Or maybe it was his quiet manner, his ability to mumble full sentences that somehow remained audible, sentences that let you know he was making an effort just to talk to you; or his skin, solid, gray and muscular, reminiscent of cement; and his clothes: always severe, stylish and expensive. He was a professional gambler after all.

Whatever it was, her awe persisted, burgeoned. People awe other people. The resultant sensation can be one of sublime excitement, bordering on terror.

I try to imagine the courtship, the series of ensuing events, the conversations, interactions, proposals, that led to, among other things, marriage and me, but I fail dismally.

When my mother describes these and other episodes of their whirlwind courtship to the neighbors or relatives (and sometimes complete strangers)—all the jaunts to Vegas and Atlantic City; the V.I.P. treatment, the opulence, the wooing—she radiates, she gushes, she glows, all while her captive audience hems and haws, shifts their feet. “Well,” they invariably say, “That must’ve been romantic.”

As for myself, I can only believe she is retelling some mythical saga, peopled by fantastical people. I can’t reconcile her account of these fables, this Hollywood movie, with her Leading Man, the hairy-legged, stone-faced fellow who occasionally prowled our home for the first fifteen years of my life. I was there.

She never told such stories when he was around. She always became sensationally quiet, careful, and silence would dominate. Awe is a dangerous thing; it masks, it tolerates, forgives. My mother was always enthralled. In thrall. And myself, I am not totally

blameless.

I remember a Halloween—1976—the year of the Bicentennial, the year before he left for good. They went to some party, he dressed as Abe Lincoln, she the Statue of Liberty, complete with papier-mache torch. When they returned home there was a reenactment, their own little version of the Civil War. I still remember the sharp crack, from two rooms away, a sound I'd heard before, like the snap of a wet towel.

I was nearing sixteen then, big for my age, I could've done something, yet it never even entered my mind—my breath not stopped but suspended, in awe, as I regarded my raging father through the open doorway with a horrible, vertiginous thrill.

Ed West



Ed West stood before the mirror. “You know, I’ve got a heart-attack face.”

“Heart-attack face?”

“Yeah. I’m destined.”

“Who?”

“Just look at me. Red-faced. Stout. Broken blood vessels. Breaking blood vessels.”

Aggie looked at him looking at himself. “What are you talking about?”

“If I were taller, thinner, wiry, as they say, or lean, or lanky, then of course it’d be stroke. I’d have a stroke face.”

“Stroke face.”

“But I’ve always been more hefty, more substantial—not beefy yet, but something more than solid. Heavysset, perhaps. No, no. Stocky.” He slapped his waist.

“Ed, you’re only thirty-two.”

“Many heart-attack victims were thirty-two once.”

“Just shut up and get ready.”

“Oh, I’m ready. I’m ready.”

They got to the country club by seven-thirty. Not the most prestigious country club in Cincinnati, but very respectable, Ed’s father a charter member. There was a lot of standing and milling about. Ed was in an exceptionally good mood. He left Aggie at the door, worked the room. Some who knew him were pleasantly surprised by his energy, wondering secretly if he were already drunk. He wasn’t. At one point he pretended to tip his hat at Aggie from across the room, except, of course, there was no hat. She smiled and continued talking to her friends.

A bell sounded and they all moved into the dining hall. A small orchestra near the door started to play. Ed cocked his head in wonder. “Hah!” he said. “I’d know that one anytime. Pink Panther song.”

People moved politely around him as he stood there, tapping his feet.

“This way, Dear.” Aggie steered him by the arm to their table. Once seated, Ed began a series of rapid-fire conversations with the other couples at the table, all the various Chesters, Lesters, and Abro-movitzs. He commented on one hairdo (“very poufy tonight, Marge); one flower arrangement (“looks like a poufy hairdo); and one golf-tee tie-clip (“how’s about a seven o’clock tee time, Lou, just you and me, sans bozos?”) There was a bit of rustling and murmuring to go with uncomfortable silences, but nothing serious. They’d all known each other for a long time.

Aggie leaned over, whispering. “Is something the matter?”

Ed smiled. “Nothing. Nothing at all. I’m tip-top. A-one!”

Suddenly there was a tinkling of glasses: spoon on wineglass, knife on water, as a tall, lanky man approached the podium. It was Dr. Felton, club president. “Great to see everyone here tonight for this very special occasion.” He paused for effect. “Another Saturday night!” His short laugh into the microphone translated into a kind of snuffle. The audience tittered. “No, just kidding, kidding, of course. As you all know, it’s time for our annual awards banquet.”

Ed shifted uncomfortably in his seat, his face tightening. He stared hard at Dr. Felton, the kind of stare usually reserved for solar eclipses, squint-like, out of the corner of his eye.

“The award for Best Club Recruiter... Harry Blum!” Felton announced quickly.

Harry Blum approached the podium, smiling broadly, revealing a mouthful of tiny teeth. Ed tried to look around Harry Blum, for a glimpse of the suddenly blocked doctor, but Harry Blum was a big man.

“Would you please sit still?” Aggie hissed.

Ed grit his teeth. He looked away, trying to distract himself. He studied the makeshift dance floor, wooden panels carted in by the groundskeeper, ratcheted together like cogs in a wheel; then at the five-man band, tuxedoed, quietly waiting, sipping their water; then beyond, down a far hall, where the reflection from the outside pool lights danced up the wall. But these were all stopgaps, for he suddenly found himself staring again, harder now, at Dr. Felton.

Emanating from deep in Ed West’s chest, sounding almost like a burp, came the pejorative: “Quack,” he spat.

Aggie’s voice was cold. “What?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all.” He leaned in closer to her. “What if I told you I have six months to live?”

Her eyebrows rose darkly. “I thought he said you were fine?”

Ed leaned back, recalling the day before, his yearly check-up in Dr. Felton’s office. The comfortable old room with the thick, padded table and crackly paper—the same office he’d been going to all his life—staring idly at the educational dummy with detachable organs—heart, stomach, liver (the one he’d always had strange dreams about) the doctor small-talked about seeing Ed at Golden Corral the week before: “You keep going back for thirds and fourths like that, Ed, I give you six months, maybe a year tops.” But Ed hadn’t really been listening, only hearing the last part (six months, maybe a year tops!) which ignited a brief moment, an unexpected twinge of pure terror, right there in the office.

He turned calmly to Aggie. “Fit as a fiddle, my dear. Tip-top. A-one.” She could hear the sarcasm. “Gave me another fifty years.” He looked at the table around him, people he’d known all his life. He beat his chest. “Strong as a bull,” he said loudly. This gained him a few quick looks and the ensuing applause led him to believe for a moment that everyone was, of course, in hearty agreement.

Someone behind him punched him lightly on the shoulder and someone else (Ted Tingley, by the squirrely voice) chanted his name out of the darkness (Eddie! Deadie Eddie!)

He'd won something.

If asked, Ed couldn't tell you about his short walk to the podium, or the reversible series of steps taking him back to his seat, but he could tell you about his confrontation with Dr. Felton's outstretched hand, and those straight (but yellowing) smiling teeth. He knew what that breath smelled like. He knew that cologne. He knew Dr. Felton as a younger man (Ed himself just a child) the athletic, handsome man now pushing sixty, gracefully aged with his hoary head and tennis-tanned hands.

He didn't shake that hand but instead plucked the small trophy from the doctor's surprised grip, murmuring something about slippery fingers and his life in his hands.

Once seated, Ed stared dumbly at the trophy in his lap: "MOST IMPROVED GOLFER." Hand-crafted at the local junior high school, Ed knew. He'd once made one himself, in woodshop (club-member Stanley Tidwell: "BEST DANCER").

A regular stand-up trophy, only where you usually had the golfer-swinging or man-bowling, instead was a crudely dimpled golf ball cut from white Plexiglass, the same Plexiglass used for cake cutters and key-chains. Poor kid, Ed thought, probably a C-minus. He stared at it on the table in front of him as if it might contain all the secrets of his world. He was drinking now and the rest of the ceremony was soon lost on him.

After dinner (fish, beef or chicken) the lights dimmed for dancing and the milling began anew. Aggie soon lost Ed in the crowd, until she noticed a surge towards the pool area. The first thing she saw when she got outside was Ed's trophy on the bottom of the pool. (She was not witness to the strange nonchalance Ed displayed when he first threw the award across the water, like a child skipping stones.) Now it rested, miraculously upright, on the bottom of the pool, the pool lights coursing through its bulb with a supernatural light. Dr. Felton sat on a nearby chaise longue, flushed and dazed. A group of men by the snack bar effectively separated him from his accoster, everything effectively blocked by Harry Blum. Aggie had an idea who that someone might be.

As she dragged Ed back through the crowd to the car he was still in a high heat, slurring his words "...quack know-it-all... stroke-face bastard!"

He slouched against the dash as she drove him home, still murmuring, trying hard to remember what had bothered him in the first place—dimly thankful for the fact memory doesn't always remember, it also forgets. Shame filtered through his body. He'd be better tomorrow, he knew. He'd apologize to everybody, especially Felton. Of course, he'd say he'd been drunk, which was, although quite embarrassing, culturally acceptable.

He turned to Aggie, the smell of alcohol biting the air. "I'm sorry," he began.

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