



# TELÉMACHUS

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# 1.

THEY FOUND MY FATHER, a famous man, sitting upright on a hundred-year-old bench, at an unfrequented subway stop called Andrews Square in South Boston. Medics determined that the cause of death was his heart and that he'd been dead twelve hours before anyone realized he wasn't waiting for a train, asleep, a vagrant, or a mound of rags beneath a hat. That image, which appeared on the front page of a major newspaper, still haunts me with its caption: "Poet warrior's heart stopped underground two miles from his birthplace." I've tried again and again to paint him, but the minute I begin to mix the gray and silver oils to portray his form leaning against those dull yellow wall tiles, I'm bothered by the question I've been trying to answer since his death: did he find the last piece of his own puzzle before he sat down in that station?

Before that picture reached the newspapers, one of his lawyers called me—Johnny. I had only talked to Johnny on the phone once or twice, back when Mac was attempting to pay my tuition fees, but I had a pretty clear image of what he looked like. In my mind, at least, he always wore a baseball cap with his three-piece suit. Took it off for court, of course. He was thin as a rail and moved as fast as he talked. He didn't drink or smoke and while we were on the phone he told me he was slowing down his Peloton to give me this regrettable news.

"Bobby, I'm so sorry." He was only slightly out of breath. "Nobody knows what happened to him. I mean leading up to the heart attack, you know?"

"Yeah, I guess. Um. Why did his heart fail on that particular night? Any idea? Had he been seeing a doctor that you know of?"

"No, I don't think he would do that unless—well, you know how he was—unless he was dragged there in an ambulance. He still smoked and drank

like a fish, as far as I know, Bobby.”

“Could he have mouthed off at someone who pulled a knife, or a gun, and had a heart attack from terror?”

“Oh—well, yeah. I mean, that’s your dad. Who the fuck knows what he might do from one moment to the next.”

“Ironic, isn’t it? I mean after a decade in every war zone on Earth he dies on a quiet bench at a subway station? I wonder if it was grief?”

“Grief? What do you mean, Bobby?”

“Well, maybe he just got tired of seeing so much. He saw enough war and death, you know? Maybe he stopped being able to separate death in the world from his own? Or maybe he was just too lonely to keep going.”

He had abandoned us and the creaking family home for the last time, as well as our little town in the Pacific Northwest, and “returned,” as he put it, “to the scene of the crime,” the Irish-Italian maze of triple-decker houses and potholed streets in Dorchester where he spent the last ten years of his life.

“How long since you’ve seen him, Bobby?”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m not the best son in the world. All these years and I couldn’t make myself do the right thing and visit him. Well, I don’t know if you know it, Johnny, but apart from the summer when I was thirteen, I’ve only known him through phone calls and letters. *Important* letters, I’ll grant him that—to him *and* to me—and they came regularly beginning after my sixth birthday until that thirteenth summer. They picked up again after that—I’ve saved the next twenty years of his letters from some pretty grizzly locales too—famine, refugee camps, friggin’ bullets flying around. You name it, he was there; I’m sure you know all about what he was paid for poems he wrote in the danger zones. Remember when he sent me to the Parisian art school and couldn’t meet me there because he was in Libya?”

“He changed, you know,” said Johnny. “He just wasn’t the same happy-go-lucky guy after the accident. So, I guess when he started diving into those hotspots he thought he found a way to shake off the misery and guilt. Found some other Mac to put out there in front of the world. You know he was all about his reputation, right? Hey, you know what I remember about Mac? It was probably one of the first times I ever met him, and I think he

might have been testing me. He was drinking and he was happy. Oh, boy, could he get happy when he wanted to.”

“I thought you didn’t drink.”

“I don’t. Not anymore. But I was kinda young then and I was meeting this famous guy. So, you know, I thought I could keep up.”

“What happened? Did he get you drunk?”

“No, not really. Like I said, he wanted to test me, I think—to see how low I could sink before I realized he was putting me on. ‘First thing I ever learned, Johnny,’ he said, ‘and I’m gonna show you—first you get a good flame off’n that cigarette lighter, so you can heat the bottle and what molecules cling to the inner walls will just drip down for one or two more tastes, or at least enough to pass around because, after all, the liquor store’s closed, the truck’s outa gas.’ I just stared at him as he fanned this lighter over the bottom of a bottle with some kind of grin I never saw before, his eyes lighting up. ‘There,’ he said, ‘what d’ya know? Wanna try some, Mr. Attorney?’ I shook my head. I didn’t want what he was selling, and I think that’s why he hired me after that. Then he said, ‘Some days you have to put your eyeball to the mouth of a drained bourbon. That’s revelation, when you crawl down into the mirror. An empty bottle’s never really empty.’

“Anyways, that’s the old Mac. He quit playing like that over the last, I don’t know, twenty years or so. And back in the day, he needed someone he could trust to be his lawyer when the lawsuits were coming at him like flaming arrows. You might have been too young to remember now, but he got famous by excoriating celebrity poets around the country in his reviews. Thanks to me, he never lost. Turned out the dark secrets he uncovered about those folks were actually true. He got even nastier when he started in on the politicians.”

I’VE ALWAYS WANTED to recapture what I thought couldn’t change but did or seemed to; the real Mac already seemed far away when I was thirteen. He wasn’t the dad he was when I was little, that’s for sure. But—and I held onto this as a kind of belief in him—he was Mac and Mac had to be Mac. That’s all. Yes, he had the rep as a poet, then there was the insufferable literary critic who was long forgotten by the time he died. When I was thirteen, his personality had dimmed; what was left of the dad I remembered from childhood had turned down to barely a flicker.

So, here I was at thirty-five with a career painting miniature landscapes almost supporting me, and I set out to find my father. And where better to start, but a small funeral parlor? I was too cheap to spring for GPS in my rental car from Logan Airport, so got lost within a mile of the place. I did have my cell phone and the kind lady's voice from their front office guided me through neighborhood streets to arrive at Scully & Sons Mortuary. Cynical as I am, I saw theirs as a business of kindness that dealt in the studied habits of concern and delicacy. I just wanted to grab his stuff and get out. I'll take charge of his ashes, I was thinking as I parked, although I had no idea where or how to disperse them. I hoped someone, maybe Scully himself, would have Mac's personal effects, whatever he had in his pockets when they found him. I hoped whoever his literary executor was had already archived his papers. Which, frankly, I thought of as a fire hazard. With this in mind, I squirmed out of the rented minicar, and there in the parking lot stood Moses Aimes, Mac's lifelong friend, more dignified than ever in his black suit and waving both hands, grinning at me; seeing him swept me back to my thirteenth summer, three thousand miles from this grimy city where Mac chose to make his last stand.

"It's so good to see you, young man. I wish I could tell you how deeply sorry I am your dad is gone. I saw him that same night and, you know, he was quiet and sedate but gave no sign something like this might happen. He apparently took off in the night and went walking to the subway."

"Great to see you again, Moses. You look in good health."

"Yeah, yeah, I get by. Well, what are we all gonna do with ourselves now, I wonder. No more Mac to kick around."

"I haven't been able to do that for a long time, I'm afraid."

"Oh, I know. I know. He told me, Bobby. He was delighted to take out all those letters you sent him, and the drawings, and the clippings of your gallery shows. He paid somebody to buy a few of your paintings; did you know that?"

"No, I didn't know that. Wow. I'm kinda shocked, you know? He could have *told* me or something. I wonder which ones he has."

Turns out Moses *was* the literary executor, and he'd already collected Mac's papers. He was well suited to the task; he had that 'friend-of-the-family' status from back in the day; he knew everything there was to know

about all of us, and now he was a renowned medieval scholar, recently retired from some university in the Midwest.

“Well, it certainly is good to see you again now that you’re all successful and established and all that, Bobby.”

“Established, maybe.”

“I do wish I could stay longer, but I have an appointment with your dad’s publisher in New York this afternoon. So, I must hop back on the Expressway in a few minutes. In fact, I’m a bit behind schedule. I stayed here for just this chance to see you. I’m glad I did.”

We found out then that both of us had the habit of scuffing gravel in the driveway and looking down as if interesting goings-on were just below our feet.

“You know, this neighborhood has totally changed since your dad was a kid here. Lots of multi-colored individuals now, and families.”

He stretched out his arms and pointed toward a hill to the east.

“Used to be, right over there, where I grew up in Roxbury, if a white family drove through, we always knew. They’d mostly keep the windows rolled up and nobody would look out except maybe some kid in the back seat like Mac. The dad at the wheel looked like he was taking a big risk, holding his breath through enemy territory. Two worlds, Bobby. Two worlds back then.”

“It feels like a different world to me just standing in this parking lot, Moses. I want to get back on the plane as soon as I can.”

“Yeah, your dad was like that with most places, I’m afraid.” He had opened his car door and was crouching into the seat. He’ll have to hurry to get to the airport in time, I thought, for the shuttle to New York. Meeting with Mac’s publisher. Ugh. Not something I ever wanted to be part of.

“Sorry, you have to take off so soon. Can we keep in touch?”

“Absolutely, my friend. I’ll write you soon. I gotta tell you about those cops who came to your dad’s house. I was his houseguest. They were just a little surprised.”

The car’s ignition was a smooth whirr, and he looked straight ahead at nothing in particular. “I miss him, you know? I really do.”

“Yeah.”

He turned and looked up at me. I tried to find an expression with my eyes that might let him know I had many mixed feelings about all this. “You



do, too?”

“Well. I guess. You know, I haven’t seen him in twenty years. We kept in touch, but that was about all.”

“Yeah, I know. I might have been his only friend. Did you know that?”

“I would have guessed that, yeah.”

“I came here to see him, and we walked and talked, but that was about it. The days of going anywhere or doing anything that seemed halfway important were over.”

My regrets were insignificant, in a way, compared to the feeling that I was left behind, and I didn’t want to let Moses go away thinking what Mac left undone really mattered all that much.

“He left when I was six and I didn’t see him until I was thirteen. Then he stayed for the summer and took off again.”

“Yeah, I know about that. Taking off like that when you were a teenager, he told me he figured he had done all he could, and it was important to him to make amends. That’s why he drove himself to go all over the place looking for famine and war. He did, Bobby. He wanted to somehow make up for what he had done in his life, for the people he hurt. And I believe he didn’t think he hurt you, but he did think you would be fine or at least better off without him hanging around, telling you what he thought of whatever you were doing. He sent you to Paris because that’s about all he thought he could do, and he thought he could help you find out what it was like to be you.”

“Yeah. I get it. Deep down he was just Dad like always. Thanks, Moses. Hey, it’s been good to see you. I know you gotta head out. Okay, so long.”

“Bobby, you should find out what happened to him. Find out what changed him. He was different after Albuquerque; you knew that, right? That summer was make-it-or-break-it time for him, and I think he broke it. He wasn’t the same Mac you knew. You should find out.”

“Okay. Yeah, I guess so.”

“I gotta hit the road now, but I’ll write to you. I know a few things about his past you might like to know.”

SCULLY’S WAS A sprawling and faded white affair with what might have once been lawn paved over in crackled tar. A few scrawny hedges blocked part of it from the street where a seemingly endless array of plumbers’ vans

and concrete trucks crawled past. Inside, the lady whose kind voice I remembered from the phone greeted me. She hardly spoke, though, other than to commiserate over what distress I must have been feeling. She was sorry for my loss. I wondered how often in a day she uttered those words. She wasn't the embodiment of kindness I had expected, greeting my sudden entrance in the cold vestibule. She didn't offer to take my coat or serve me tea or anything; she indicated that I could follow her along a carpeted narrow hallway where we made a turn into yet another corridor, a long, mauve space that looked as though it would go on for miles with panel doors one after the other on both sides. At the seventh of these, she stopped, opened a door on the left, and beckoned me to enter. She said, "I'll give you a few minutes, Mr. Bacca," and closed the door so that I was alone in the room with a small card table and a large gray cardboard box. An envelope rested on top of the box with my name on it. A letter from M.M. Bacca to me, Robert Hieronimo Bacca.

*Dear Bobby, I don't know when I died, but I made all the arrangements with the Scullys so you wouldn't have to. This should accompany something like an urn with my ashes. I knew Judith Scully in grade school, so they were delighted to get my business. Here's the gist: though disposing of ashes is illegal apparently unless you go miles out to sea, find the best-looking bridge without a streetlight that crosses the Neponset River at high tide on the dark of the moon and deposit half my ashes in the river. Take the rest of me back with you and drop them in the Pacific. I loved you all my life, Mac.*

It was a cardboard box with Scully's printed logo, as dry and subtle as "memento mori." Releasing the four flaps of the lid, I saw the transparent bag, thick plastic, filled nearly to bursting with ash. They were silken to the touch, with hard knots of what I could only think were remnants of his bones, Mac unburnable to the very end. I couldn't take my hand away, the ash between finger and thumb, the ash rubbed into my palm, steeping my hands down in there, embedding him within the creases of my knuckles, lifelines of my palm, finally awash in the death of my father.

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