

Sunday Repose

The ride back is uneventful. We buy a couple of six-packs, baby-steps to bring us back to the world of living, moving, sentient beings. By Lake Charles, the blood is circulating in our veins again, our heads have stopped hurting. We stop and pick up some frozen daiquiris for the road. The steps are getting bigger. We pick up speed, anxious to get home.

When we reach Houston, mid-afternoon, Ben says, “Let’s go to Hawkins’.”

He isn’t ready to stop now, with a little momentum built up. Neither is the Doc; neither am I. We head straight for Geoff’s.

Geoff Hawkins and his wife, Carrie, run the Sunday flop-house for the Gents. Everyone congregates at their place Sunday afternoons. It is partly because they actually have a house (Geoff does pretty well in the construction business) and also because they don’t mind. They enjoy being rugby social central.

Carrie is an ex-rugger herself and a bit wild. She is the perfect complement to Geoff’s button-down personality.

When we arrive, there are five or six floppers already distributed about the living room couches, watching the NFL on TV. We come bearing gifts: a couple of twelve packs and ice. I always felt you should bring something if you invite yourself over to someone’s place, even if it is home away from home. And, it better be something more than your good looks and sparkling personal wit. I take the beer and ice to the back porch where Geoff and Carrie keep a large cooler for just such occasions.

Ben goes to the dining table, sits down, pours a beer into a cup and starts bouncing a quarter off the table – back to the scene of many competitions and past glory for him. He starts needling Dopey and Cy to go a few rounds. I’m not sure how he picks his victims, but I think it has something to do with their level of sobriety. Someone getting tipsy is more easily finessed into a game, with the added benefit that if they are already wobbly, it makes them an easy mark.

I’ve tried to figure out why Ben was so focused on quarter-toss all the time. I’m not a psychoanalyst, but I have a couple of ideas. One is his personality is just such that he has to be in control and dominate those around him. Quarter-

toss is a direct competition. He is good at it. In a short period of time he can reduce someone to blubbering, babbling foolishness. It is a power rush. Two is that if he doesn't win, he ends up doing the blubbering and babbling, which is where he is trying to get anyway. It is still that chip on his shoulder about his neck. He is making the best of where he is, but has never accepted it. He always wants to erase those thoughts of what could have been.

He actually manages to needle Dopey and Cy into a game. Dopey has even brought a girl with him, Genie's friend Sharon, from O'Malley's. She too joins the competition. Lug tries to get me into the game, but I demur. He calls me a wimp to which I agree wholeheartedly. I have to work tonight anyway. I am going to take these few hours and recover before heading in to O'Malley's.

Michael is already wedged into a corner of one of the couches. His head is leaning back, eyes closed, snore imminent. I take the easy-chair that Cy vacated when he went towards his doom at the dining table – good view of the TV and comfy, perfect for a couple of hours of recuperation.

We sit, sip beer, watch the game, Dallas versus the Giants, and drift in and out of consciousness. Geoff is talking business to his lead carpenter, a non-rugger named Hal – something about a job that had to be done first thing in the morning. Yes, we're a diverse group. We let anyone into the family. There are no requirements and no commitments. You just never get that feeling of brotherhood, of blood and adrenaline flowing through kindred veins, until you strap on some rugby boots in anger.

The TV buzzes, I doze, the quarters clang off the dining table. Then there is a different clang. The phone rings.

Carrie picks it up.

"Bueno!" she says.

"Hey, Derrick. What's..." She pauses. I can see her face go ashen.

"You're joking, right? Tell me you're joking!"

"Oh, my god! When? What happened?"

She has all of our attention now as she listens. There is no more talking. The TV is still on, but I can't hear it. Even the competitors at the dining table sense some change in the atmosphere of the room and stop their game.

"Oh, Jesus. Do you need anything? Can we come help?" She goes on, then listens again.

"Okay," she says, setting the phone down. When it had rung, she had stood

and had been going to some more restive spot. She never got the chance to take the first step, though. Now her knees buckle and she sinks back into her chair. She has our attention.

She begins to speak, tears starting from her eyes, lower lip quivering. No mincing, no softening, “Denny’s dead.”

“What!? No!” There is universal and categorical denial. This can not be. We’d just been with him yesterday, comrades in battle and revelry. His vibrant lifeblood coursing through his veins, as was ours.

“My god! What happened? Is it a mistake?”

Carrie is sobbing into her hands. She uncovers her face and tries to answer.

“That was Derrick,” she gets out. “They got separated some time last night. He’s not sure what time. The police found Denny this morning on a French Quarter back street. He’d been mugged. They’d stabbed him in the stomach. Two or three times. He sat there and bled to death before anyone found him.”

She goes back to sobbing. It was quite a speech. I don’t think I could have gotten out that many words in a row, considering my current feelings. As a group, we’d meanwhile gone from curiosity at the phone conversation, passing through shock and were now rapidly heading toward anger. We need more information.

“Motherfucker! Did they catch the son-of-a-bitch? What’s Derrick doing? Does he need help? Where’s Darryl? Motherfucker!”

“Let’s go back,” I say to Michael, thinking only of action to counter the instant pain welling up in my chest, stomach, head. I need a diversion from it, something to refocus my mind so I don’t have to deal with it.

As Joseph Conrad said, “Action is consolatory. It is the enemy of thought....”¹

And pain..., and helplessness....

“Yeah,” Michael agrees. “We can go help Derrick and Darryl. Figure out what happened. We can help track down the miserable, son-of-a-bitching, motherfucking bastards.”

“Count me in,” says Ben.

“I’m going, too,” adds Dopey.

Carrie, hearing this, gets control again. I am really sympathizing with her.

¹ Conrad, Joseph, *Nostromo*, 1904.

After all, she got the full shock, with no warning. We at least had seen her reaction and started to put up the defenses.

She says, “No. Derrick’s taking care of it. There’s nothing for you to do. Derrick’s already talked to Donal. He’s flying in from Minneapolis. He’s going to take Denny back to Ireland. It’s all done already.”

And, of course, she is right. There is nothing for us to do. We would have to stay here and deal with our loss, and helplessness.

Donal is Denny’s brother. He had come to Houston when Denny moved here. Both of them had played for the Caballeros. Then, Donal couldn’t find a regular job in Houston. When a friend from their Minneapolis team had called down to Houston to offer him a job retro-fitting gas pumps, he took it. That was two years ago and the first time the brothers had been separated since I don’t know when. Donal had come with Denny from Ireland when Denny, right out of school, started his first job in Minneapolis. It put some perspective on our pain, thinking what it must be like for Donal.

It was going to be tough on everyone. Why do the good ones go? Denny had a few faults, to be sure, like drinking and a lack of judgment when drunk. Then, who is known for judgment when over the legal limit? I guess Denny’s frequency in the state highlighted the issue. Like the time at a wedding he tried leaping into the pool from the balcony of his fourth floor hotel room. He managed to clear the pool edge, but the water wasn’t as deep as he thought, or rather didn’t think. That incident broke his ankle. He didn’t play again for eight weeks.

When he did play, though, he was a force on the pitch. Great pace and a huge work rate. At open-side flanker, a natural ball fetcher, he created an extra ten to fifteen possessions a game for the Gents. You better believe that makes a difference. Then there was his quick smile and sarcastic Irish humor. Modest, he often focused his sardonic wit on himself. If you were in the clan, you were fair game too. If you never felt those rapier cuts, then you weren’t yet initiated.

He must have been stellar at work, although we never saw him there. He was a star, rocketing through the bureaucratic ranks, on his way up the ladder. It looked like there was no stopping him.

Until, that is, he was culled out of the herd, one Saturday night on a dark back street in New Orleans. Someone took him, alone, away from family, from friends, from clan, from the Caballeros, and extinguished the light. They took

him alone, without the compounded strength of his mates. And, probably drunk, because they couldn't have done it when his wits were with him. They cut off the shining arc of his life and left it broken, unfinished, only to be remembered by us who knew him, and only completed through the strength of our collective imaginations.

That night we gather at O'Malley's to share our sorrow. The word spread like the proverbial fire gone wild. The whole team comes together on short notice to mingle tears and pain and memories.

Michael and I drive together to the bar, neither one of us wanting to be alone with our thoughts. We talk about the wedding, the time Denny broke his ankle. We talk about all the times we had driven him home from O'Malley's, or some other bar, or party, when he was way too far gone to get himself home. We relive those moments in games past when Denny worked his magic on the pitch and made the difference, made something good happen for the Gents. We skirt the edges of the hollowness now inside us, the missing part that would now always be gone. We can't find a way to express it in words, but know we were both feeling the emptiness, and know it is okay to leave it unsaid. It is still shared.

Sunday is my usual shift at O'Malley's, but I can't handle it. I get Sam, one of the other bartenders to cover for me. O'Malley donates a keg that we tap on the back patio. Michael and I sit on a bench, hang our shoulders and heads, and start to drink.

The group begins to congregate. Ana comes in, gives me a kiss on the cheek, then sits down next to Michael. She puts her arm around him and asks, "How're you doing?"

"Okay," he grunts, and turns to look at her face. Tears are welling in her eyes, tears in his eyes, and now, watching them, tears coming to my eyes. They hug silently, cheek to cheek, for a long, long time.

Ben has come in, and Geoff with Carrie, as well as Bryan Dodgen. They are clustering by the keg, filling cups and talking, almost whispering, quietly.

Genie comes through the door, sees me on the bench and walks over. Petite, her big round eyes are almost level with mine as I sit. She can see that my eyes are wet, brought on by witnessing Ana and Michael. I can see her eyes start to fill, too. She doesn't really know Denny that well, but has a tremendous capacity for empathy. I stand up and then bend down to hug her. I can't take

the direct eye contact. The hug, though, I hold long and tight because it is so soothing. She doesn't protest. She hugs me back.

When I feel the length of the hug has probably gone too far on the inappropriate side, I slowly let go and sit back down. Genie sits next to me.

"Sharon called me and told me," she says. "I'm so sorry."

"Thanks. I'm trying to come to terms with it. I just can't believe it."

Sharon and Dopey have come in, too. They come over to join us by the bench. Dopey is taking this as hard as anyone. Though they didn't have a lot in common, they did have one thing, and that was drinking. They spent a lot of time together at O'Malley's, downing pints and closing the bar.

"I should have been there with him," Dopey says, resolute. "I didn't go because I just don't have the cash right now. If I'd been there, they wouldn't have gotten away with it."

Nobody was really sure what Dopey did for a living, but he was always short of cash. He some how managed to keep on going, just squeaking by. How, though, we didn't know.

"Dave," I say, using his real name to emphasize the seriousness, "You couldn't have done anything. Darryl and Derrick were there. They couldn't do anything. How would you have changed it? The only difference would have been we'd be having a wake for two people instead of one."

"No. Darryl and Derrick lost him. Denny and I would have stayed together. I would have been there with him. They couldn't have jumped the two of us."

"Maybe you could have, but you weren't there," adds Michael. "You weren't there because you didn't know it was going to happen and you can't beat yourself up about that."

"It's this freaking money thing. If I'd had some spare cash I would have been there. It's my fault for not having that worked out."

Truth is we are all feeling guilty. It is running through everyone's mind that if they had just changed one little thing in the past, it could have stopped this train, rolling down the tracks to that back alley in New Orleans. On the other hand, when a butterfly flaps its wings in Africa, there's going to be a hurricane on the gulf coast. There's no avoiding it. It's going to happen.

Michael changes the subject, "Remember when he broke his ankle jumping out of that hotel room? We were all down there by the pool yelling at him to jump. He thought about it for about two seconds then went flying right over

my head. It scared the hell out of me. I thought he was going to hit me. I felt the breeze part my hair as he went past.”

“Not everyone was yelling at him to jump,” Ana replies. “Some of us were trying to get him to come to his senses. It was a stupid thing to do.”

“Yeah, it was stupid, but he made it,” Michael says.

“How about the time we shaved his eyebrow when he passed out at the bar in Dallas after the Barbos’ game?” I ask. “He was ready to kill somebody. We didn’t know he was having a big meeting at work on Monday. I’m surprised he got through that one with his job intact.”

And those same stories are repeated through out the crowd, over and over again, lubricated by tears. The beer flows, but the effect is different. We don’t get loud and stupid. Everyone stays relatively quiet. The alcohol eases the pain and softens the atmosphere. After a while there are even smiles here and there occasionally. A wake should be a celebration, after all.

After a couple of hours, we decide we should sing something. The team gets together in a half-circle in the middle of the patio. We do a few verses of “You Are My Sunshine”, sotto voce:

You are my sunshine,
My only sunshine,
You make me happy
When skies are grey.
When skies are grey.

You’ll never know dear,
How much I love you,
So please don’t take
My sunshine away.
My sunshine away.

The other night dear,
As I lay sleeping,
I dreamed that
You were by my side.
You were by my side.

You'll never know dear,
How much I love you,
So please don't take
My sunshine away.
My sunshine away.²

We'd done what we could. We can't fill the void. Maybe we can cover it up though. Patch it and leave it.

People start to leave in ones and twos. It's Sunday night, after all. Tomorrow is Monday, back to work. Life, what is left of it, will keep on going.

² [You are My Sunshine](#), op. cit.