

Out of the Park

I don't know if it was the shuffling sound that woke me up, or if I was already awake, sunken into my old bed at my parents' house, feeling a boozy headache coming on. Most likely it was the shuffling of his ancient loafers and the squeaking of that damn walker coming down the dark hall to get me. I thought maybe just this one time—just one day in my miserable life in that house—I'd be safe from his voice pulling me from sleep. But no. The door edged open. "Wake up!" That grainy voice I'd heard all my life boomed in at me. I was tempted to play dead but had pity on him and rolled over to face the door.

"Wake up, son. Time to rise and shine and get going. 7:30! Wake up!"

"Yeah, Dad, I heard you. I'm up, Dad." Jesus.

"All right, I'll get your breakfast going."

I propped myself up on my elbow. "Dad, how many times do I have to tell you? Don't fix me any breakfast. Jesus Christ!"

"He's got nothing to do with it. Get your body out of the bed. We have to be at that office by nine sharp." The shuffling and squeaking headed back down the hall.

I pulled the covers off, sat up and hung my head. Nine? The appointment wasn't till 9:30. Typical, typical shit.

I stumbled along the hallway, dragging my hand down my face to wake myself up. In the kitchen I found him leaning over the walker trying to get the eggs from a low shelf in the fridge.

“Come on, Dad, let me do that.” I nudged him aside to get the egg carton. The cold light blasted my sorry eyes. “Really, though, I’m not hungry. I’m not awake, either. Let me just get showered—”

“All right, get a move on then!” He was already in his plaid cotton short-sleeved shirt and Bermuda shorts. It must have taken him hours to dress himself.

Turning to head to the bathroom, I stumbled and slammed against the awards wall. I knocked with my usual clumsiness into one of the hundreds of certificates pinned into the bulletin board there, tearing it from its spot. I let the paper drop to the floor and staggered into the john. Jesus. Just one more day of this shit, and I’d be out the door.

When I’d gotten cleaned up and dressed, I discovered he’d found a way to pick up that damn certificate and pin it the hell back up on the board.

“Dad, come on, I could have done that.”

“No matter.” He knew I was too much of a slob to do something like pick up a piece of paper. “Here’s your eggs.” His voice still had that gruffness that’d always scared me when I was a kid.

“Dad, I said I don’t want any eggs!”

He shuffled over to the toaster. “When your mother died, I made it a point to learn to cook. Got pretty good at it, too. If you weren’t such a lazy son of a gun you could do the same thing. Nothing to it. Just grab some ingredients, eggs, meat, cheese, whatever, some butter and salt—hey, you’re done. It’s that simple.” He turned to me, and a glint of hazy sunshine lit up his glassy blue eyes.

“Dad, sit down.” He was fussing around at the sink, trying to wash dishes. “You’re making me a nervous wreck. Just sit!”

“Nonsense. Come on, eat up. We gotta get a move on!”

In the car I thought about how even in his condition and the fact that his appointment was with a doctor who could level a death sentence on him, he still had that energy. The salesman in him wouldn't let him go, wouldn't let him believe anything could go wrong. He ignored the weakness and just kept going. He had to keep on selling himself, letting everybody know what a swell guy he was, how he'd accomplished so much in his life, and that nothing was ever going to get him down. I could only take this stuff in small doses. The past two weeks—the two weeks I'd promised him—were it for me. In one more day I'd be cruising on back to my place in Memphis, my guitar, and Marla who'd be waiting for me with her skinny arms wide open and one of her sloppy kisses ready take me over the edge. Just one more day.

By the time we pulled into the parking lot, the hazy sun had turned to drizzle. “Dad, I'll drop you off here.” I stopped on the white stripes at the entrance, pulled his walker out of the trunk, and got him set up in the foyer. “OK, now wait for me while I park. Wait!”

I had to search for a damn spot, and when I got back to the foyer, he'd moved on to the reception desk. He was in full-blown conversation with the girl there, telling her about his exploits as a salesman back in the day. She smiled at him like she was really interested. As though anyone in the world could be interested in that old bullshit.

“OK, Dad, what office?”

“Suite 310, as this lovely lady just informed me. This way.”

Shuffling along with that disgusting walker—he insisted on using the old one Mom had struggled with, rickety wheels in front, filthy white pads on the back legs—he led us to the elevator. I walked alongside and nearly tripped over my feet trying to move so slow.

In the elevator, he started to cough, not choking, just dry stuff. I offered him a wrinkled handkerchief from my pocket, but he waved it away.

We found the door labeled *Suite 310. Dr. Herbert Melin and Associates* in sharp shiny brass on a wood panel. Impressive. I held the door while Dad shuffled through.

“OK, Dad, I’ll check us in. Have a seat.” He moved to a chair and plopped himself down. Just then I caught the slightest hint of a wince, like his face had been struck by a tiny bolt of lightning.

“Mr. Mead for Dr. Melin,” I announced. I looked at the clock. “I know we’re early but—”

She looked at me. “Are you Mr. Mead?”

“No, no, I’m not him. I mean, yeah. I mean, no, it’s my father, Mr. Mead.” I was falling all over myself as usual.

She handed me a clipboard with forms to fill out. Jesus, couldn’t one doctor just pass this stuff on to the next one? Every friggin time, more forms.

He’d pulled a sports mag off the pile. “Those Mets. Can’t they do *anything* right?” He turned the page, nearly ripping it from the magazine. *No, Dad, I guess not, not right enough for you.*

I had to go through all the forms with him. The waiting room had that smell, stuffy and antiseptic at the same time. How the hell did they create that awful odor? I turned in the forms and sat.

Strange, I thought, him having to call me to help him out. Never happened before, not in all these years. As far back as I could remember we’d had nothing but bad relations. When I was a kid, I was a royal screw-up, and even later, things just didn’t go right. Now he’d called to tell me he had a bunch of doctors’ appointments set up and couldn’t drive himself and was sick of spending money on cabs. So what was I supposed to do?

I was the only one now. Tommy had done a real number, jumping the way he did. No one saw that coming. Every time I had to drive over that bridge, I thought I was going to vomit. Dad's best boy. Jesus.

But it never stopped my father. Not him. He just kept adding to that awards wall. Citations from Rotary and Elks Club and Chamber of Commerce were thumbtacked or push-pinned onto the bulletin board. All kinds of awards for good citizenship, volunteering, leading task forces all over town. Framed letters from Congressmen he'd campaigned for and politicians he'd met lined the wall into the dining room. Photos of him shaking hands, accepting thanks and congratulations, fist-bumping with boy scouts, standing with his arm around the inner-city kid he'd been mentoring since who knows when. Non-stop and nauseating. Some of the papers up on that board were yellow, they were so old.

Tommy'd been the same way. Captain of the baseball team, head of his class, all that crap. "Hit it out of the park, son!" Dad would call after him any day Tommy had a test at school or a practice game. "Out of the park!" Tommy'd wince at that, but then he'd turn to smile and wave back at him. I'd just keep on walking.

The girl at the desk called our name. I helped Dad out of his chair and saw that flash of lightning zip across his face again.

"You OK, Dad?"

"What are you talking about?" His throat sounded full of phlegm. "Let's go." He grabbed the walker and shuffled ahead.

Once I had him seated across the desk from the doctor, Dad started in, all about his volunteering for the hospital for thirty-five years. The doctor nodded for a while, then cut him short. "You . . . I have to tell you, Phil—OK if I call you Phil?—I've been told you're

the kind of guy who would want to hear it straight. I've looked over all the test results and scans, as well as the reports from all my colleagues, and I'm sorry to say, it doesn't look good." The rest of the conversation, pretty much one-sided, went downhill from there. It had my heart jumping, even though it was no surprise. For the past two weeks, we'd heard the other doctors hinting at it, then handing him off to the next one. But Melin's was the final word: no operation, no treatment was going to do anything.

Dad sat without moving a muscle, except for his hands in his lap; they were twitching like the wings of an insect caught in a spider web.

While the doctor delivered the verdict, I tried to pull together some courage. *What do we do now?* kept zipping through my brain. But instead of asking, I just sat there like a dolt. Rest and pills was all Melin offered. He started to scribble on a pad. "Here's something that might help him feel more comfortable." Period. Weeping Jesus, this was my father we were talking about. The doctor handed me the prescription slip. The look he gave me, kind of stern and shrewd, told me all I needed to know.

"Call me anytime you have questions," he said. Yeah, right. Like I'd be just overjoyed to listen to "*Press one, press two, press seven*" for the rest of my fucking life.

Dad sat there. Quiet, not moving. Just his hands jerking.

"Phil?" said Melin, like he was trying to wake up the old guy.

My dad finally blinked. "OK, then," he said, "let's head to the drugstore! Come on, son." He managed to push himself out of the chair and, forgetting I'd put his walker off to the side, he surged toward the door.

"No!" I yelled. The thud as his body hit the carpet went right through me. He let out a sharp cry like a dog on a chain, then groaned and rolled over onto his side. I bent down. "I'm all right! Leave me be! Don't touch me!" Melin and I stood back. Dad took his time making

it up to his knees, then onto one knee. His hands splayed out on the carpet, his head poised up toward the door, he was like a runner getting set for the 50-yard dash. After a while he caught his breath. As Melin held the walker, I tried to get my father to his feet. I pulled him up from behind, my arms under his armpits. I felt his flabby waist, his shoulder bones sharp, jutting out. He was a lot lighter than I thought. There was nothing to him.

In a few minutes we were out the door, the walker's determined squeak leading us down the hall, to the elevator, and out to the foyer.

“OK, Dad, wait for me here while I bring the car around. Right here, OK, Dad? Wait!”

“All right, son. I'm not going anywhere. Thanks, son. I'll wait,” he said in a hoarse whisper. He shot a look at me, as though asking me a question. Then he cleared his throat and his eyes darted away.

Outside was a downpour. I pulled my jacket up over my head against the rain. It was hard to hear, but as I passed through the automatic doors, I thought he said something. I think—I'm almost sure—he called out to me in that grainy voice, “Hit it out of the park, son. Out of the park!”