

Another Death

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ONE SATURDAY MORNING Jimmy wondered about himself as he lay in bed instead of watching cartoons on TV or shooting baskets through the hoop under the eaves. They didn't have a garage, but they didn't need one since they didn't own a car. Jimmy's classmates were now learning to drive. This distressing fact made him feel underprivileged as well as undeserving. In grade school he'd been ashamed to have his classmates know he chopped kindling for his mother's coal stove, and because his mother had no refrigerator, twice a week he hauled ice from a nearby service station in his "High Flyer" wagon. He always waited until dark to avoid them going to their parties or music lessons. They might not notice him in the shadows, but he always turned his head anyway.

His immediate neighbors knew of his situation and accepted him. But those students who mattered most to him lived in fine homes in the prestigious neighborhoods on the bench. Every one of them had a father who defended clients, owned his own business, or lectured at the university. Although Jimmy was seldom included in their after school activities, these same students had chosen him to edit the student paper. If he'd had a car, he might have been invited to join them. But then they might start visiting him too and see his house and learn his family's secrets. It was better to see them only at school.

This resentment caused Jimmy to smolder with jealousy and self loathing. His friends never seemed frustrated. There must be a connection between what one had and didn't have and who one was. One thing his friends all had that Jimmy did not have was a dad.

He had a father somewhere but in name only. What he knew about him made it doubly hard and would have been scandalous for the others to know. It wasn't prison. Prison would have been easier to explain. Jimmy worried that it might be hereditary. His father had been committed to an "institution" as older people called it or "the funny farm" as it was known to some of Jimmy's classmates. Jimmy was only two years old when his father had been pronounced schizophrenic. He had been hospitalized for fourteen years now and had spent his best years playing cards with uniformed attendants or pacing before rows of chairs in a room with dull green walls in a mental ward.

Jimmy's mother saved her money and had once or twice taken him on a two day bus ride to see and talk to this man. On those occasions she had to remind him to call the man "Dad." They always met in a smaller room just off the ward. A room whose walls were somewhat brighter—a lemon yellow. During some visits the man would only sit and stare. Other times he spoke too much—telling of elaborate plans to put Jimmy to work on a dry farm in a remote location where he imagined he owned title to some land. The man told Jimmy that he would have to stop attending school then. Jimmy didn't care about farming, but he really loved school. He hoped to go college.

Last night his mother told him that his father was going to be released from the hospital and would return to live with them. He would arrive the next afternoon. She would meet him at the bus station while Jimmy was delivering papers. When Jimmy returned that evening, his father would already be there insinuating himself back into their lives in the home he was used to sharing only with his mother. Why should he despise the man's coming back to live in his own home? Jimmy felt ashamed and hoped to appear cheerful. But he was used to suspicion and deceit. In the third grade he'd been asked to bring his bugle to school. He had received it as a Christmas present. After school, they were tutored for only a week. The teacher praised his progress. He was assigned to stand with the others each morning and afternoon to play taps for the flag ceremony. After an entire year, they were honored at a special reception where they were served donuts and all the ice cream they could eat. The teacher praised all of them, including Jimmy. The principal shook their hands and thanked them. No one noticed that Jimmy barely touched his food. He knew that he had never once managed to blow a single note. During those thirty weeks he had stood with the others—his cheeks puffed out, his temples bursting, his face red with exertion but only pretending to play his bugle. He was never sure if anyone else ever knew or if they just humored him so as not to expose him. During those younger years, it became his most unforgettable lesson in deceit. And by junior high he became very conscious of his social position and the terrible stigma he would feel should his father's illness ever become known.

His entire childhood seemed one long ordeal of personal ineptness and uninvited trauma. He recalled his hysteria when he'd run screaming from a wolf spider on a neighbor's lawn. Or there was the day he'd picked wild flowers and discovered that their stalks were filled with small red ants that swarmed over him. He only stopped screaming after his aunt tore the weeds from his hands, removed his clothes, and put him in a tub of water.

Another time his mother had trusted him to rent the apartment which was attached to their home. The woman who answered the ad seemed polite and well dressed. She wore a fashionable suit trimmed with the pelt of some animal whose small beady eyes, like her own, stared through him. She paid the required deposit and demanded the key. Her name was Miss Olyer, and they never saw her again. But he heard disquieting noises at night as she entertained gentleman friends. This had filled him with dark foreboding. Before Jimmy's mother could

evict her, Miss Olyer left without paying the rest of her rent. Jimmy felt this was one more instance of his personal inadequacy—another death.

There were additional deaths as well. The girl who sat next to him in math in the fifth grade seemed normal and healthy before the Christmas holidays but died suddenly and never returned. Her name was Leilani, and he remembered her telling him that her parents had honeymooned in Hawaii. Her name became confused in his mind with the Hawaiian word "Aloha." After that experience, Hawaii became a morbid place of shadows he wished to avoid.

Then there was Jimmy's cousin who swallowed a tack when he was a baby. It became lodged in his lung. His parents were poor farmers, and they mortgaged their land to take him to specialists at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, New York. But the tack remained in Burdean's lung. When he came to visit, he would hack large globs of yellow phlegm into wads of tissue. They always carried tissues with them. They put the soiled ones into brown paper bags, perhaps to show to the doctors or to burn in their own coal stove.

When they were older, Jimmy and Burdean would play games—checkers, pit, and Parcheesi. Burdean would smile gratefully. He had a strange rasping voice and a country drawl. He'd been out of school so much due to his poor health that there was little Jimmy could talk about with him. It would certainly never do to expose Burdean and his mucous to Jimmy's classmates.

Jimmy took piano lessons from a friend of his mothers who taught him at a reduced rate. Her studio was on the top floor of the elegant McCune Mansion. Jimmy was always her last lesson of the day. One afternoon when his lesson ended, she walked with him down the hill, took him to a soda fountain where she treated him to a hot fudge sundae. As he left to go home, snow began to fall and it was cold and overcast. Jimmy noticed a shabby newsboy on the corner where he caught his bus. He was skinny and stooped. His mittened hands were chapped and raw. And his lips were nearly blue. Jimmy heard a familiar raspy cough. It was Burdean. He must have been in town for a check-up and was selling newspapers to help with expenses. He hadn't visited Jimmy this trip. Maybe he was too busy or maybe he sensed how Jimmy felt about him. Jimmy's bus arrived. He hoped that Burdean hadn't noticed him, and he quickly boarded the bus. Later that year his Aunt phoned from the country to inform them of Burdean's death. Jimmy's mother urged him to travel with her to the funeral. Jimmy told her that he didn't feel well. Another ruse-like his bugle playing.

His piano teacher's semi-annual recitals had been a nightmare for him. During the last two recitals, he'd frozen during his performance and could not continue. Rushing for the second time from the Mansion's ornate recital hall, Jimmy ran outdoors and raced down seven tiers of sandstone steps. He vowed never to return. How had he lasted for four tortuous years when he played so abominably and never with inspiration? He had never learned to memorize. These lessons had become another mortifying deception.

Jimmy's piano lessons were bound up with yet another death. He stopped to see a movie on his way home from his weekly lesson. Something about the

poster under the marquee drew him inside. It showed a glass ball which enclosed a miniature village and produced a snow storm when it was turned. Jimmy's mother had a ball like that on her mantle. The ball in the picture was immense. In the foreground was a child's sleigh which was covered with snow and consumed by flames. Jimmy could barely make out the inscription on the sleigh. On that same night he learned of his dear grandmother's death. This was the first death in his immediate family and it caused a feeling like the strange mood of the film. After that he never thought of one without the other.

Jimmy was haunted in his sleep. He would find himself in a recital hall of a great mansion at a keyboard which suddenly became a sleigh. It bore the inscription of "High Flyer." He didn't know how to begin. It was snowing in the hall and the snowflakes were wads of tissue which stung his hands. They suddenly became red ants that swarmed over him. When he looked up at the piano sleigh, it had become a coffin, his grandmother's. But how does one play a coffin, how do you play your own grandmother?

In the audience were friends from school, and their fancy parents wore their leis and fur pieces with unblinking eyes, which resembled Miss Olyer. Some smiled, some thumbed their noses and shouted "aloha." In the middle, oblivious and smiling, was his hacking, spitting cousin, Burdean. Were they all mocking Jimmy because he couldn't play or because Burdean was his cousin? Was Burdean smiling at Jimmy's distress? He couldn't be sure.

Another death had occurred just months before. The eighty-year old man who sat on his porch all day drawing nature scenes with pastel chalk. He had people call him Uncle Art. Uncle Art lived with his niece and her husband. They looked after him and prepared his meals. Uncle Art was always beckoning the neighborhood boys to come up on the porch and talk to him. Very few did. Whenever his name was mentioned, there were snickers and knowing looks. It seems that Uncle Art had solemnly lectured boys about sex.

Jimmy had his own paper route now and Uncle Art was one of his customers, so he was obliged to speak to him. Uncle Art persuaded Jimmy to follow him to the cellar to see his landscapes. They pored over gauzy sunsets and mountain streams. Before they finished, the old man sat next to him and urged Jimmy to loosen his belt and allow Uncle Art to test his manhood.

Repulsed to numbness, Jimmy endured the old man's groping. He recovered his nerve and rushed to his bike and freedom without asking for the paper money. Days later Uncle Art became ill and no longer sat on the porch. The next month at collection time, Jimmy spoke to his niece. She told him that Uncle Art had died the night before in the hospital. She invited Jimmy to the funeral. She said Uncle Art had thought he was the finest young man who had delivered their paper. Jimmy did not go.

Flinging the last paper on the last porch, Jimmy headed home. What would his father be like now that they shared the same roof? Another Uncle Art? Pleasant or demanding? Would Jimmy learn to cover up how he really felt and play along? Probably. He had plenty of practice. Entering the house he saw his

mother who was smiling too broadly. She informed him that his dad was resting in her room upstairs. He was tired from his long bus ride, but he was not asleep. Jimmy should go upstairs and greet him.

Blanking his mind as he had with Uncle Art, Jimmy dutifully plodded to his mother's bedroom. There under a quilt was a man whose profile Jimmy vaguely remembered. "Hello Dad," he finally blurted. The man slowly turned his head. "Jimmy?" Then he roughly kissed him. The man's bristles scraped Jimmy's beardless checks. "How are you, Dad?" The man waved him back. "Get to bed now. We'll talk in the morning." Then he turned from Jimmy toward the wall. Jimmy stayed at the bedside awhile before returning to the stairs. It wasn't like he'd expected. This wasn't Uncle Art or his music teacher. But it was a man who knew what he wanted—whatever that might be—and from now on would have his own way. Would this be their only conversation? The encounter somehow fit the dreary impressions in his mind. The fact that none of them were pleasant seemed to confirm that he must be made in his father's mold. He would gradually discover who he really was as he got to know the man now lying on his mother's bed. For the moment it struck him like one more death—Jimmy's own. He knew his response would be further evasion.