

THE PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR

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The doorbell rang as I hung up the phone, and then I heard my father's deep, imposing voice fill our entryway.

I stood and walked slowly into the unlit hallway unnoticed as my wife, Allison, hugged my father and then took his coat and bag. Though she'd only met him once, at my mom's funeral, I wanted her to share my dislike for the man. From what I'd told her, Allison knew enough about him to warrant a little enmity, or so I thought, but she cheerfully chatted away, asking him about the traffic through Primm Valley and the weather on Cajon Pass.

I heard my father's voice but hardly recognized him. His face was lean and bony, and his hair, thin on the top of his head, had gone almost completely white.

I stepped into the entryway.

"Hey, Champ. How you doing, Slugger?" he said, calling me the pet names of my childhood. The jarring unexpectedness of those names seemed to burst in my ears with multiple frequencies, bringing vividly to my mind twilight summer breezes and the metallic peal of ball connecting with bat under the insect buzz of stadium lights—the sounds of another time, nostalgic and melancholy and irretrievable. When I didn't say anything, my father gazed over my shoulder into the living room. I stepped aside to give him an unobstructed view: the black-and-white family photos of Allison and me against a weathered brick wall in Old Pasadena, Henry and Jake slack and smiling in our arms; the Tuscan leather sectional and the hand-knotted rugs; potted palms in the corners of the room and English ivy draping the built-in mahogany bookcases. I wanted my father to see all of it. I wanted him to take in

each soft, smooth surface reflecting the warm, rich glow of the life I'd given my family.

"Beautiful home," he said. "Magnolia Park. My favorite stretch of Burbank. I guess the P.I. business is all right. Must keep you busy."

"Too busy," Allison said. "You'd think Troy's a long-haul truck driver with how much he works. And then last month he was called to be the bishop. At least now he has to be nice to everyone."

"A bishop?" My father squared his shoulders so he stood a little straighter. His fingers fluttered against his pant legs. "Your mom would be proud." He turned to Allison. "And my grandsons?"

"In bed," Allison said. "They're rascals at the dinner table. Trust me. We wouldn't have a minute of peace. But they'll be up early. You can surprise them. All week I told them grandpa's coming."

I stared at my father. A stranger passing through or a man trying to make an impression? I wasn't sure. He wore tapered khakis with crisp pleats, tasseled Gucci loafers, and a loud Tommy Bahama polo shirt blooming with printed red and yellow hibiscus flowers as big as my hand. The pendant lamp above us flickered on the glass face of the silver Omega chronograph strapped to his wrist. My mind whirred with the incongruous arithmetic of what I knew about his personal finances and the cost of the watch and the loafers.

I knew about his life, more than I'd told Allison. It was at my fingertips: bank records and credit reports, a spotty work history as an entry-level sales rep with a half dozen companies, two short-lived marriages after my mom, some bad checks in Montana that almost landed him in jail, and a DUI outside Reno. I even had his home address. No charming bungalow on a tree-lined street, no bougainvillea-draped arbor or broad, shaded porch. The street view of his North Las Vegas apartment complex brought to my mind the crumbling stucco, dark stairwells, and disintegrating jalopies of the blighted fringes of the San Fernando Valley where my investigators and I often staked out fraudulent insurance claims and delinquent debtors. The bare, inglorious reality of my father's life comforted me. I was glad to see how low he'd fallen.

“Let’s eat,” Allison said, nodding in my direction, as if to prompt me. I realized I hadn’t said a word since my father’s arrival.

I lifted an arm, an awkward, wooden gesture, to direct him to the dining room, but instead he laid his right hand on my shoulder. “Give the old man a hug,” he said. I almost stepped back, as if his embrace were a punishment. But I stopped, barely flinching as his hand drummed against my back. When he let me go, I looked closely at his face, at the spotted skin stretched tight over the cheekbones, as if the skeleton were working itself through. I could smell him, the rankness of age mixed with a sharp, citrusy cologne. I hadn’t seen or spoken to him in four years, not since my mom’s funeral, where he’d shown up late, uninvited, and then slouched in a side pew with a bored expression on his flushed face, seemingly more interested in the clock on the chapel wall than in what was said about the woman who’d once been his wife for fourteen years. His conspicuous boredom and the alcohol on his breath had infuriated me, and I let him know it. We’d argued after in the cemetery parking lot. But in those four years, my father had become an old man, slightly stooped, dappled on his face and hands.

He stared back at me with an air of uncertainty and hesitancy, perhaps wondering where we stood, what I knew, what I’d forgiven.

“Yes, let’s eat,” I said, walking into the dining room, my father trailing behind me.



My father stood over the table, sniffing the air like an animal on a scent. “You’ve gone through too much trouble,” he told Allison, giving her a courtly bow before sitting down. She pooh-poohed that idea as she stuck a serving spoon into a steaming bowl of mashed potatoes. “We’re glad you’re here,” she said.

As we ate, I watched my father. He barely touched his food, just pushed it around his plate. I knew I was searching for something in his cadence, in his words, a gesture or facial tic. What was I looking for?

Maybe a flicker of guilt and remorse. Just their fleeting shadows would have satisfied me. But I saw nothing of them as his initial unease seemed to melt into a cloying braggadocio, my father as I remembered him, a gravity pulling all the attention in a room to himself. He sat slightly reclined, one elbow parked regally on the armrest, his dreamy gaze fixed on some point behind us, a king on his throne with a captive audience.

He jabbered on through dinner about his adventures as a traveling sales rep, his stellar sales record that had garnered him awards and honors, the stars and world luminaries he'd happened to bump into on his sales trips, their big-hearted invitations to visit them in Beverly Hills and the Hamptons, and, of course, the dangers of traveling desolate roads where he'd had to defend himself with his trusty Smith & Wesson .38. In retirement, he planned to go abroad to live like a king in Bolivia or Ecuador.

Allison listened with an enthusiasm I couldn't muster, leaning in toward my father, clucking her tongue and shaking her head, encouraging him with spirited interjections like "Oh, that's incredible!" and "No, he said that!" as if she were gossiping with a neighbor over the back fence. She seemed taken in by my father, but all I could hear was the silver-tongued phoniness in his self-aggrandizing stories. He spoke as if he were living the high life, a revered and well-compensated employee, a magnetic soul people clamored to befriend. Of course, there was no mention of the spotty work history and the dumpy Vegas apartment, the failed marriages and the bad checks.

"So what about you?" my father finally asked me. "How's business?"

I crushed the linen napkin on my lap and noticed, for the first time, how the crystal bowl holding the mashed potatoes was shaped like a rose. The idea seemed ridiculous.

My father appeared to read something in my gaze, an incredulity and irritation pushing through the neutral expression I'd tried to project since his arrival. His eyes dropped to his plate, where he busied himself cutting a green bean into sections. He suddenly seemed winded, the unease of earlier a palpable presence between us.

When I didn't answer, Allison said, "Troy, tell your dad about that car accident outside your office. I want his opinion."

My father looked up expectantly, fork poised above his plate.

"You tell him," I said.

Allison stared at me, her lips pressed together, and then she turned to my father:

"There was a bad car accident outside Troy's office," she said. "A FedEx truck ran a red light and T-boned a Latino guy in an old truck full of yard equipment. You know what Troy did? He grabs a camera and starts taking pictures of the accident. And then he gives his card to the man, who by that time's laid out on a stretcher in a neck brace, all banged up. You know what happened? Just yesterday he calls Troy, barely able to speak English, to say he's suing FedEx and wants to buy the pictures. Five hundred dollars. That's what Troy charged him. I told Troy he should've just given him the pictures for free."

My father slapped the tabletop with his open palm. "Way to sniff out a buck," he said. "Just like your old man. Carpe diem. Make hay while the sun shines." He patted Allison's hand, as if to reassure her of something. "FedEx will settle for two hundred times what the guy paid for the pictures. He could buy five new trucks with the settlement. He could go back to Mexico and live like royalty." Then my father leaned back and crossed his arms. The story reminded him of something that happened to him when he was younger, and then he was off again on a string of self-congratulatory tales.

I couldn't listen anymore. I couldn't even look at him, at the way his whole body shook and then collapsed with laughter, as if he'd been struck by something funny. I suddenly felt constricted, the chair narrowing against my hips, the table boxing me in, my thick sweater holding me like a straitjacket. A thin sweat glazed my nose and forehead. I wanted to claw at the sweater, rise and throw the chair back, run from the dry, heated air in the dining room and escape into the night.

"I have to leave," I said, standing so quickly my chair almost toppled over.

“Troy!” Allison said. Her fork fell through her fingers and clattered across the wood floor.

“Earlier. That was Eric on the phone,” I said. “He can’t do surveillance tonight. He’s sick.”

Allison stared at me. “Can’t this wait? I mean, why do you have to go?”

“This is a big case,” I said. “There’s a deadline. It’s priority.”

“Can’t someone else go?” Allison pressed both her palms onto the tabletop. “You own the company. Can’t you get on the phone and make someone else do it?”

“It’s too late,” I said. “This is my responsibility. It’s important.”

“There are other things you’re responsible for,” Allison said, her head tilting in my father’s direction.

“A doctor’s divorcing his wife because she’s a drug addict,” I said. “Unless we prove that, she gets custody of the kids. Think of the children.” I looked at my father. I wanted to see his face, the absorption of what I said. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I have to go.”

My father flashed me an easy smile. “My son, the private investigator,” he said. “Don’t worry about us, Slugger. You go out there and get her.”

I pulled my camera from the hall closet, then opened the front door. Dark, heavy clouds filled the sky like a great expanse of upended mountains, each sagging peak like a tightly clenched fist. The tennis courts across the street in Verdugo Park were as brightly lit as a stage. A man and a floppy-haired teenage boy, obviously the man’s son, grinned and stared up at the gloomy sky between volleys.

“When are you coming home?” Allison asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Late.”



I drove north on Scott Road, squinting up at the Verdugo Mountains, but they were more shadow than substance, lost to the night and

to the looming storm, except for a faraway red light on Tongva Peak that pulsed like a heartbeat.

I thought of Allison and my father at the dining room table, and how my father, this man I hardly knew, would soon occupy a bedroom down the hall from mine.

He'd quickly become a stranger to me after leaving, a belated birthday card with no personal addendum to the printed words; the occasional postcard scratched with a nondescript sentence or two I could barely decipher; a phantom my mom scrimped and saved to take to court for a meager check that might or might not come by the fifth of the month. He was like a person I once knew, a distant presence distilled down to a handful of contradictory memories—though the sound of his voice, strangely, had never diminished in my mind, its deepness and resonance, reading me the Hardy Boys, or describing in tantalizing detail, as we tossed a baseball in the backyard of the home we rented in La Crescenta, the life he planned for us, the turreted mansion on Point Dume, the yacht and private jet. It was this voice, my mom later told me, so confident and sure of its power to persuade, like something on TV, that had charmed her when they first met, my father, a lapsed, half-hearted Mormon who appeared one Sunday in her Las Vegas singles ward, and who, like her, had lost both parents at a young age.

His was a voice, I was to learn, that acted as collateral for the most fabulous promises and claims, to my mom, to the gullible strangers my father would unabashedly seek out in parks and restaurants, and to the naïve members in our La Crescenta ward, impressionable newlyweds and middle-aged couples ill prepared for retirement. He had a knack for sniffing out the insolvent. With that voice he could lull people into spilling their financial guts, then he'd shake his head and say something incredible like, "I bet you want to quit that rotten job" or "I know a way to pay off that mortgage in ten years," as if he'd long ago liberated himself from such workaday matters.

Later, some of them would sit in our living room, and I, as my father insisted, was to be at his side, smiling and nodding, a picture

of unwavering filial confidence and trust, as he described an ironclad investment or a wave-of-the-future product certain to bring wealth and prosperity: vacation rentals, magnetic shoe inserts, a patented gas additive to radically improve fuel economy—of course, all for the price of a start-up kit and a cut of whatever they sold to their friends and family. The Armani suit he wore for these occasions and the BMW that magically appeared in our driveway the day of these meetings fortified my father's grand promises and claims. His impassioned promises of wealth and leisure, the vagueness of his products, the evasive, half-answered questions—only years later did I recognize my father as a fraud.

The hokey side businesses never paid out. His day job, something with real estate, something vague and suspect, never paid out either. Not long before he left, I remember three silent Latinos in blue coveralls hauling our furniture away. I remember the whiff of alcohol on my father's breath, and soon violent arguments with my mom about lost paychecks and his elusive whereabouts in the evenings. Then he was gone—and now suddenly he had reappeared, a stranger passing through town on his way to a sales convention in San Diego. My father.

At the end of Scott Road, I stopped at an ornate wrought-iron gate and entered a code the doctor had given me. The gate swung open without a sound.

I drove through wide, twisting streets—Cabrini Drive, Via Venezia, Via Verona—with towering homes, fringed by lavender, rosemary, and cypress, like ships riding sculpted half acres. The doctor's home, on the leveled top of a steep hill, looked over the quivering grid of the San Fernando Valley. The home's tile roof and arched porticos reminded me of a Tuscan villa. I could see into the living room. A single lamp projected a moody light over the walls and furniture.

I parked across the street, obscured in the deep shadow of an untrimmed oleander that arched over the road, a place that offered a view of the front window and driveway. I scanned the radio for a

station, mesmerized by the racing indigo numbers, as if they were a code. The dial stopped. A man with a deep baritone voice argued for a preemptive military strike against North Korea. I reclined the seat until my eyes were just above the bottom of the window, so anyone looking out from the house would see an empty car. The commentator's voice pitched higher as he squabbled with a caller who didn't share his opinion. I wondered if my father had gone to bed.

When Eric called, I was grateful for an excuse to leave. I could have reached out to another one of my investigators, paid him a little more for the inconvenience. Someone would have gone. But as I listened to my father, oblivious and unrepentant, I feared I might say something accusatory and cutting. Or worse—I feared I might haul him out of his chair to ask if he'd fulfilled the spiritual journey he described in the short note we found on the kitchen countertop. I wanted to convey to him in precise detail about our lives after he left: the bleak cinderblock apartment complex off the 170 in North Hollywood, its echoing hallways and stairwells that oozed the sour vapor of cigarettes and mildew; the first job my mom, without a college degree or professional skills, landed in the sweltering laundry of a linen and uniform supplier in Van Nuys, how maggots from bloody scrubs and soiled hospital sheets would crawl up her arms as she loaded the washers; and later, how as a receptionist at a plastics manufacturer in Pacoima she felt insignificant and marginalized, relegated by her boss to answer phones and sort mail during company parties and events. And for me, the stigma of free lunches and thrift store clothes and food stamps. And the insatiable hunger I felt for years. Not for food or drink—but for him. His presence. His voice. How could he cut us from his life so quickly, seemingly without regret and pain? As a husband and father, the thought confounded me.

Suddenly, another light turned on in the doctor's living room, jolting me from my gloomy thoughts. She was there, the doctor's wife, standing at the large picture window in a purple bathrobe, her face illuminated by the ground lights in the yard. Her brown hair hung over

her shoulders, tangled from sleep, as she stared into the night with puffy eyes. She stooped under the weight of something in her arms. Lifting my hand slowly, as if a quick movement might disrupt the scene, I framed her in the viewfinder and pressed record.



It was past two when I started for home.

Rain beaded the windshield. My breath fogged the glass. I felt as if I were overheating in the car's stale air. I cracked the window, and a cold wind steeped with the mineral odor of wet pavement hit me. Above, the dingy sky was the color of steel wool.

I stopped at Glenoaks and Magnolia, waiting for the red light to turn. The roads were empty. The light changed to green, to yellow, and then to red. I idled there with my foot on the brake, watching the sequence again and again. The colors bled across the drenched asphalt in shivering pillars, a warped likeness of the world.

At home, I quietly opened the front door and walked carefully through the dark living room. Light filtered through the rain-streaked picture window, projecting watery shadows across the wood floors. Allison's potted palms and English ivy cast strange, distorted silhouettes over the walls. The smell of cooked meat lingered in the air. I heard a muffled sound. The blood pulsed in my ears.

"Troy."

My father slouched in the leather loveseat, a bottle in his hand. I felt anger slip in behind the fright. "Are you drinking?" I asked.

"This?" my father said, raising the bottle. He laughed. "No, this is supposed to be some new age miracle cure a friend got me on. Stronger immune system, mental clarity, deeper sleep. All for a price." He breathed out a tired, raspy sigh. "I just want to sleep through the night again. Your mother could fall asleep in a minute. A clear conscience, that's why." He pointed to the sectional. "Stay a couple minutes with your old man."

I forced myself to sit.

“So how’d it go?” he asked.

I stared at his hand gripping the bottle. “What?”

“The surveillance. The mother strung out on drugs.”

“Long. Boring.”

“So what happened?” he asked. “Smoking gun?”

“That’s Hollywood,” I said, “the stuff of movies.”

“But still, you get the bad guys, right?” My father leaned forward. “I have friends whose kids are teachers, lawyers, dentists, boring stuff like that. But when I tell them you’re a private investigator, they’re interested. They want specifics.”

I noticed how the shadows of the water coursing down the window twined together and cast an enormous net over my father. I rubbed my eyes, wondering what grand, inflated image of me he’d constructed for his friends.

“Like that murder case you did,” he said. “The skinheads who killed that Mexican kid in Riverside. I even recorded the interview you did for *Dateline*.” He set the bottle on the slatted top of the oak coffee table, next to a stack of Allison’s *Good Housekeeping* magazines. In the silvery light, the bottle and the magazines appeared like a sepia still-life painting.

“Why are you here?” I asked. “Do you need something? Money?”

For a moment, he didn’t say anything, and I wondered if he’d heard me.

“I just wanted to see you and Allison,” he finally said. “I wanted to meet my grandsons. And maybe I thought you and I could just talk.”

“About what?” I asked, hardly recognizing my voice. “What do you want? Forgiveness?”

“I don’t know,” my father said. “Maybe there’s no forgiveness. I just thought we could sit and talk like two men who know people make mistakes they regret forever. I don’t want to pretend I didn’t hurt you and your mom. What I did, leaving like that, I think about it every day.”

A car passed slowly, water slushing under its tires. Headlights raked across the living room walls, briefly catching my father’s tired, bony

face. He blinked, then held his eyes shut, but not before I saw their heavy sadness. That sadness. I marveled at its sudden familiarity since I'd become a bishop, staring at me from across my church desk, spread over weary, burdened faces waiting for me to utter a reassuring word.

I stood and walked to the window, peering through the streams of water on the glass. The wet pavement glowed under the streetlamps. I wanted to leave, to retreat up the stairs and into the oblivion of sleep. But something held me there. In some way, the glow of the streetlamps and the slushing tires of the passing car, like the hum of a crowd, brought suddenly to my mind warm summer nights, the smell of cut grass and the glow of stadium lights.

I was so close to the window my breath formed small circles on the glass. I knew anyone looking in couldn't see us.

"When we lived in La Crescenta," I said, "remember what happened when you found out the city didn't have Little League? It became your cause. You went to city council meetings. You wrote letters to the chamber of commerce. You got businesses to donate money for uniforms and equipment. You found a coach."

My father laughed. "I charmed them. Or maybe I was just a pain in the old backside. But how could I let all your raw talent go to waste? Lightning on the bases. A lethal arm in the outfield. Don't get me started about you."

I touched the window. It felt glacial against my open palm. "Near the end of my mission, I was in this little ward outside Baton Rouge. I don't know why, but my companion and I had to speak on Father's Day. Who asks missionaries to speak on Father's Day? It made no sense. And what could I say, me with an absent father? Do you know what I talked about? How you started Little League in La Crescenta. After what you did to us, that's what I talked about. My companion was this rich kid from Minneapolis, dad a big executive at Target. With all he said about his dad in that talk, how great he was, he told me that night how his dad would never have spent all that time and gone through all the trouble.

He was almost crying when he said it. He envied me. Can you believe that? He was jealous of us—of you.”

Behind me, I heard the rustle of fabric and the fleshy crack of knees, and then my father’s steps moving toward me. He stood at my side, breathing heavily.

“The woman, the doctor’s wife,” I said, “she didn’t know I was there. I’m sure of it.” The rain was coming harder, peeling the dead leaves from the asphalt and pushing them into the gutters. My reflection smeared and shuddered with the movement of the water on the glass. “You know what she was doing? Rocking her three-year-old daughter to sleep. Singing songs. Wiping her nose. That’s what I got. Three hours of it.”

“Then it’s over,” my father said. “Case closed.”

“It’s not like that,” I said. “He’ll pay us to keep watching until she does something his lawyer can misconstrue or exaggerate. That’s what I do.”

My father shook his head. “It seems like a strange business. I guess I really don’t understand your work, Troy.”

“You don’t understand?” I laughed. “I’m a voyeur. I look for what people want to forget. I hope people do terrible things so my clients are happy.”

“But they’re guilty, right?” my father asked. “I mean, there has to be a reason.”

I felt exhausted. “Sure, most are. But the truth is”—I hesitated—“the truth is, if I had to, I could find something on anyone. Everyone has something.”

“Seems like a line of work that lends itself to pessimism,” my father said. He paused, then tipped his head back and laughed. “I just thought, what if some guy came to your office tomorrow and hired you to find the good in someone? Wouldn’t that turn the business upside down?”

“No money in it,” I said.

“I’m just speaking in the hypothetical,” my father said. “Say this guy walks into your office, gives you a name and address, and hires you to

find some good in this person. Video, photographic evidence, whatever. You know, make a case for it. Could you do it?"

"I guess, if I wanted to," I said.

"And let's say," my father said, tapping a knuckle against the cold glass, "that this is the address, your address, and the guy wants you to sit outside the house, on a night just like this, to watch a father and son talking like we are. Do you think you could find some good, maybe just a little, in the father?"

"It'd be too hard," I said. "Without lights, I couldn't see a thing."

"But what if you could?" my father said, an insistence in his voice I'd never heard before. "What if you could see it all perfectly, the son standing where you are, and the father standing next to the son, not knowing someone's watching?"

Rubbing my eyes, as if that might help me see better, I said: "Dad, after so long, I don't know if I care anymore." And then I stepped away from the window.

I watched my father, who stood like a statue, unaware I was no longer at his side. He reached his arm into the space where I'd stood, smiling sheepishly at his reflection as his arm fell into emptiness. I sat down heavily on the loveseat and pulled at my collar. I felt restricted, caught in the shifting net of watery shadows working down the walls and across my body, knowing that the camera beyond the dark window, meant to find a little good, wouldn't be fixed on my father. But on me.

RYAN SHOEMAKER {ryanshoemaker@suu.edu} has a debut story collection, *Beyond the Lights*, available through No Record Press. T. C. Boyle called it a collection that "moves effortlessly from brilliant comedic pieces to stories of deep emotional resonance." Ryan is an assistant professor at Southern Utah University. Find him at RyanShoemaker.net.