

TRIQUARTERLY



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Park Bench of the Mind

Steiner and his son were bickering again. I trailed them by a dozen steps and plotted my course toward the park bench. The brick path was uneven and cracked, hell on old toes. I stopped to catch my breath beneath a tree that was mostly dead; it seemed as tired as I was of twisting out fresh shapes. Three steps on, a pain burned in behind my eyes, like a piece of metal sliding in. Steiner disappeared in front of me. Half my body turned itself off, and I collapsed into the monkey grass.

Steiner's son, the bastard, seemed to be spinning me around as he carried me up the sidewalk to his car. But I was lucky he'd come; Steiner was so frail he could barely pull his wallet out of his pants.

My leg was tingling when we reached the hospital, but my vision was mostly straight; and the doctor standing over me looked so young his mother might have bathed him that morning in the sink. He said I'd had a stroke, and of course I knew it because I'd been with Coke in the Kingfisher when he went numb and started slurring and collapsed into Lake Palestine. At first we thought he was just feeling the waves; Coke had been seasick all through the war, even when his ship was in port. He was mayor of Grand Prairie, Texas, when we lost him that afternoon.

That my stroke was minor made no difference to Martha when it came to confiscating my keys.

"I'm not moving in."

"Then we'll get you a panic button," my daughter said.

The stroke was like an earthquake, I told her, which had returned balance, appeased opposing forces. And a panic button was pointless un-

less I fell on it, because I wasn't going to carry around some clicker like a Mennonite waiting for the end.

"You'll call me every day at seven o'clock," Martha said, "if I ask you to?"

It wasn't a plea a father could refuse. I rang her every evening thereafter to say I was just a day closer to death and nothing more.

I played cards with old men who'd tell you where they'd fought but nothing else, the lot of them carrying around the same horrid secrets they couldn't admit they shared. We bet enough to keep the blood moving and to have something to argue about, but we were past the point of money mattering, all of us dead-pecker geezers wearing shirts bought by buried wives.

I saw myself age in the way the others eyed me, in the fear they would be next to forget whether a straight beat a flush. Simple addition became as indecipherable as code, and I began to need help with my bets. Losing didn't bother me. The house and car were paid for, savings long enough in a bull market there would be something for my girls. But I couldn't stomach the guilt the men showed when taking my chips.

Steiner quit playing poker around the time Vernon died in his sleep. Steiner had retired from most everything related to the present, and we had little to talk about at the park bench, save for the old days and his son, who he disliked for as many reasons as there were stories: threatening to run from Vietnam, carrying a flyswatter to the clothesline out of fear of bees, marrying a "troll in sequins." Steiner whirled his arms when he ranted, which made his hearing aids squelch. I felt lucky Josephine gave me daughters. Raising sons didn't follow well from war for a lot of fellows, who never reconciled that they came home less than what they'd been.

We converged on San Francisco after we survived the war, and the women tore us out of our clothes. No one drew a sober breath for days. Steiner woke up married. The Navy sent me to New Orleans for my discharge where I met a girl from Metairie. I dated a Rhodesian-born Brit who cussed like a sailor and fit right in. At College Station I gave around a whole crop of crabs.

Vernon and Coke tasted one semester of college and quit to start a trucking company. Now that I think of it, it could have been a construction business. Maybe Vernon just drove a delivery truck. I don't know anymore. Once my friends were on the loose, I lost interest in

studying and burned through more jobs than a circus freak, hawking silverware, selling insurance, collecting debts for a loan shark going door to door in the Dallas slums before dawn on Sundays. Or maybe that was a movie. I know I ran a cooling tower for Humble Oil down in Baytown, hot and dirty shift work as enlightening as it was horrible. And Texas A&M took me back.

One night Steiner Jr. found Steiner in the dark, phone disconnected, the power off, food rotting. His plan to "save electricity" earned him deportation to the nursing home.

"I didn't do anything," Steiner said. "They got me locked up in here, Clifton. Come get me."

I visited him at Gentle Pines or whatever that funhouse was called, but I didn't like the humming oxygen machines and the tangled green tubes. Two old ladies didn't know what they were anymore and kept stealing Steiner's clothes.

There was an awful racket of whistles and bells when we pushed open the side door one day, but I had the car parked just right, and we were on the street before anyone threw himself in front of the tires.

We cruised to Lake Palestine doing forty on the Interstate, pretending it was the old days before we'd lost our minds. Steiner and I had ridden all over that lake, chasing channel cat in my Kingfisher. East Texas had been full of chicken cleaning businesses, and back then I'd bought blood bait from a black man whose blood was so thick the catfish would hang themselves.

As we pulled back into the nursing home, Steiner yanked on the glove box.

"Steiner, what are you doing?" I said.

"I'm getting change."

"Change?"

"For the slot machines."

"What slot machines?"

"They got 'em inside."

The last months of Steiner's life he spent pretty confused.

"Remember us," he said before I lost him for good. "You've got nothing else to do."

With Steiner in the ground, Martha didn't want me limping alone to the park bench. I spent whole weeks on the couch, remote control in hand, waiting for that brunette on Hunter to come on. I drove my aircraft carrier of a car the half mile to the convenience store and stock-

piled frozen dinners, and the cute Latin girl made change out of my hand. I came home, showered and waited for seven o'clock. What began as an act of pacification became a sacrament, each phone call to Martha another marker in the road of outlasting my friends.

In 1942, our crew pulled an air force officer from the Coral Sea who traded me his pistol for a quart of whiskey. We stayed in contact. He married Josephine in '46. And she found herself a widow in less than a decade. Her poor sot of a husband survived antiaircraft fire, the bombing of Tokyo, and a night adrift in the ocean after he lost his plane, but he didn't survive Highway 59 when he lost control of his car coming home from checking an oil well in Wharton County. I never liked myself for thinking it, but I thanked the ocean herself he was too drunk most of the time to get her pregnant. I waited after the funeral and straightened my affairs, took a job with Bank of the Southwest. Walking into that lobby, hearing my heels click on the marble, returned something to my step I'd had in those first weeks on a battleship. Then I went to Josephine. Her worry over the neighbors seeing my car at the curb was all, that first day, that kept me from staying for good.

Josephine taught school and gave birth to our daughters and made the best biscuits a man could ever hope to taste. I can recite the lending terms for a dozen borrowers and the board of directors of most every Houston bank in 1957, but I can't say where Josephine and I had Christmas in the years after the girls were born. I can piece it together and probably get most of it right, but the past is shot through with holes. Josephine is everywhere in what's left of me, lurking.

Particular days I wish the strokes had erased. By the time the phone rang Martha had probably waited half an hour after seven o'clock. With a second call, I pulled a washcloth off the tile and covered myself. My forearm had split open like rotten fabric.

Martha was alone when she finally let herself in; we were past the point of ambulances.

"Oh, Daddy," she said, straightening my head.

"Too many frozen dinners, kid."

Martha pulled the shower seat to the middle of the bathroom and hauled me off the floor with all she had, like a peon dragging cotton up a hill. The towel dropped as I centered my ass on the chair. She grabbed a shirt from my closet, smelled it, guided my arms into the sleeves.

She was in the other room when she handed down the verdict.
“I’m packing your suitcase.”

Martha and her husband cleared out their guest room, tiled a seat into the shower—slip guards and industrial railing, things someone stumbling at the abyss ought to have. On the bedside table were old pictures of a man who had little to do with me, that perfect skin like something of a myth. They added the Playboy channel to their cable package, which they probably thought would keep me from tripping up old ladies with my walker. I took it as a compliment. But the world’s nemesis was a stream in me flowing mostly underground.

Life was comfortable at Martha’s. I enjoyed the company, ate fewer frozen pizzas. I spent my days mostly the same, though, on a different couch, imagining I were back at the park bench with a view of the sky. Martha had learned from her mother the secrets of dealing with difficult men, but that didn’t lessen my guilt—for the stink of my bathroom, the carpet I fouled and the lamp I ripped from the wall. What I missed most surprised me: my silver mailbox, a last link besides my kids to the life I’d lived. I missed the hope of a postcard arriving from some Navy man I’d caroused with in the Philippines. Martha changed my address, and the mail arrived straight to my hand, but it wasn’t the same.

Josephine and I were in Reno. I know it was Reno, but I see us in Coshatta. I was still strong then, I think, and playing tennis with Vernon once a week. I snuck down for mimosas and early blackjack. When I returned to the hotel to get Josephine for lunch, she was still in bed. The sunlight was so bright at the edges of the curtains, and the room so dark, it seemed the afterlife was right there behind the glass.

“Get me some water, Clifton.”

I hurried to the bathroom sink. Josephine’s long dark hair curled around her neck. The water glass shook in her hand, and I knew then that something was making itself known. Josephine smiled and pulled herself up and we played craps together on the riverboat. But she’d been tired all week. Four days later the hatchet fell: stomach cancer. And the last decades of her life were compressed into a year.

Not long after the move to Martha’s, a light bulb shattered in my brain, and whole years of recollection were lost. My blood probably figured there was less reason to clamber upstairs. I was suddenly colorless, immobile. The period of crashing through end tables was cut short, the

final course charted. Martha hired a cousin to babysit during the day and to ensure I survived the trip to the commode. But I was a creature more civilized people would have left somewhere out in the woods.

Once we buried Josephine, I stopped being Martha's father. We became friends. She let go of her bitterness at all the times I'd failed to deliver the words I'd thought I had right in my head. She parents me now, and like a child all I can give is love. She's administered the last rites, said she'll be okay. I can see she's tired. Her husband's face says I'm living in his house. He works from home—freelancing, they call it. He gets more time with the kids, but I don't find dignity in work that can be done in pajamas.

Sometimes for Martha's sake I consider holding my breath. But I pulse on—for Steiner, Coke, Vernon, and Josephine—and I struggle to help my daughter understand that if die a bit hungry, I'll still love her.

Chad, my grandson, is standing beside my bed, wearing his yellow hat. T-ball, I think, or soccer. Every so often he walks in and grabs the picture on the end table, of me as an officer, and holds it close to my face. Today, he's just looking at me and picking his nose. I start in on a story about the day I tried out for a minor league baseball team. I try to lug him into my lap. But I'm just hip and bone and I slur and spit out of my sagging mouth like a kid choking on tobacco. The boy steps away from me. I want to tell him it's a good day, a great day, when the words in my brain are falling into line as though they've remembered themselves. He watches my face as he might a creature pulled up from the depths of the Pacific, who's lived a half-century in the hull of a ship. He seems a little scared. Before I can give Chad a reason to stay, he's gone, and the door closes behind him.

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